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"WELL, MASCOT," SALUTED HAMBLIN, "HOW DO YOU LIKE IT?"

THE BOAT-CLUB MASCOT;

OR,

Dan Decker's Double Deal.

BY JO PIERCE.

CHAPTER I.

WORK FOR A DETECTIVE.

"DISAPPEARED, an' left no trace behind!"

"Strangely disappeared!"

"That means a good 'eal in New York, whar folks disappear an' are never heard of ag'in."

Kit Clipper shook his head gravely as he spoke. Well did he know that crime flourished in great Gotham, and that the evil deeds brought to the notice of the public were not all that

occurred between the Battery and High Bridge.

"I am terribly worried about Charles."

"You hev reason ter be, I should say."

"I can't imagine where he should go after he left the boat-house—"

"Did he leave the boat-house, at all?"

"Oh, yes; I told you that he was seen to leave."

"So you did, but yer witness was open ter doubt. Now, don't understan' me as sayin' positive that I think Charles went out o' sight in the boat-house, fur I ain't a hair o' reason fer thinkin' so; but all things must be considered when we're lookin' up crooked cases. As fur this case, I've a good mind ter set right to an' find Charles."

"Oh, Kit! if you will, I'll be your friend forever!"

"B'glory! that's a prize worth workin' for, an' I'll do it!"

The speakers were a boy and a young lady, who were seated in a front room of a house on Charles street. The latter was named Louise Birdston. She was about twenty years old, and pretty of face and charming of manners. She was not so vivacious as the average New York girl, but, reserved in the presence of casual acquaintances, was lively enough when with her friends.

Her present companion was Kit Clipper. When John Clipper had occasion to name a son, he thought that a plebeian name like his own was not good enough for the boy. He called him Christopher, only to see the name cut down to "Kit" by those who knew the boy in later years.

Kit was now sixteen years old, but small for his age. He was healthy and strong, however, and accustomed to outdoor life. His face was bright, but not handsome, the features being somewhat irregular.

His father had been fairly successful as a grocer, but had retired from the business and was living an easy life on his savings.

Kit was not yet in business, or, indeed, done with school. He was quick to learn, but indifferent as to the application of what he knew. Neither at home nor among his usual associates did he hear the English language spoken with care, and the result was that he chopped up his words in breezy disregard of grammar and spelling.

Among his latest-made friends had been Charles Birdston, a young brick-mason.

They had met casually, but Charles had at once become interested in his companion, and had asked him to the house where he and his sister, Louise, lived. Kit had confirmed their first good impressions, and, at the end of six months, ranked among their most valued friends.

There was trouble in the Birdston house, however—Charles was missing. He had been working at his trade in the boat-house of the Sea-Horse Club, but had not returned home as usual, one evening.

Inquiry elicited the statement that he had left there at the usual hour, but that no more was known about him or his movements.

Nearly a week had passed, and Louise was in despair. She had reported the case to the police, but without any good result. How much they had done she could not tell, but they stated that they were unable to find any one who had seen Charles after he left the boat-house.

As the young mason was temperate, honest, of good habits and devoted to his sister, the case was mysterious. The police suggested that he had eloped, but, though he was twenty-three years old, his sister felt sure that he had no love affair.

Her theory was that he had met with foul play, and she had worried over it until nearly ill.

Kit Clipper knew something about the Sea-Horse Boat Club. It had been composed, originally, of a number of old sea-captains, and had resembled the usual boat-club but little. Later, young men were taken in—some of them the sons of the old captains, but mainly persons picked up at random.

Nobody had ever spoken unfavorably of the club in Kit's hearing, but he knew that the members, individually, had no superfluous respectability. Whatever the old captains were, some of the young men were very "tough," to use the terse expression of the day.

When the youth spoke slightly of the Sea-Horse Club, he did so vaguely, but the words led to the mental inquiry: "If Charles had met with foul play, why was it not as likely to have been in the boat-house as outside?"

No outsider had seen him leave the place.

"Kit," said Louise, earnestly, "if you can find my brother, I will do my best to reward you. Your father is richer than I am, and perhaps you have all the money you can use—"

"Jes' so; don't talk about that. All I should want would be your good will and Charles's."

"That you shall have."

"I'll look inter it. I don't see what more I kin learn than the perleece, but I kin try. I'll do it now!"

He arose to go, but Louise had more to say. She gave him credit for considerable shrewdness, and it awakened fresh hope to have him give the promise. She encouraged him all she could, and then he left the house.

His own home was on Ninth avenue, so he started up Hudson street in that direction. He had reached the corner of Jane street when his attention was attracted by the sound of excited voices. Looking into the cross-street he saw three men on the sidewalk, one being a cabman who stood by his vehicle, while the others had the appearance of having been his patrons.

These men were engaged in an altercation. Trouble has an attraction for both old and young, and Kit hastened toward the scene.

He saw that one of the men was old, white-haired, somewhat feeble and bent, while the other was scarcely old enough to be called more than a youth. He was, however, a muscular, heavy-built young fellow, and his red face was the index of a rough, turbulent nature. The old man, on the contrary, was refined-looking. Both were respectably dressed.

The first distinct words that Kit heard were in the old man's shrill voice.

"Don't you deny a thing!" he exclaimed, "for I know that you are guilty!"

"Oh! come off!" the young fellow coarsely retorted.

"Your word is not to be believed, anyhow."

The younger man looked scowlingly at Kit, and then answered in a more persuasive voice:

"Say, Uncle Steve, hush up, will you? You'll have a crowd collected here."

"I don't care if I do!"

"Do you want to advertise all our troubles?"

"I want to advertise the fact that you tried to rob me."

"I did nothing of the kind."

"I say you tried to 'bunco' me."

"You're a liar!"

The young man shot out the retort with disgusting disregard of his companion's years, but it appeared to be in keeping with his nature.

"I've a good mind to have you arrested."

"You hadn't dare!"

"Hadn't I? Here, boy; go for a policeman!"

"Do it, and I'll smash you in the face!"

Both of the latter speeches were leveled at Kit Clipper. "Uncle Steve" was angry and excited; the younger man was as coarse and low as those of his nature usually are. Kit stood in a state of uncertainty.

"Hadn't ye better patch up a truce?" he asked.

"No, we hadn't, and we won't. Will you go for an officer, or shall I send some one else?"

All of Kit's sympathy was with the old man, who kept his gentlemanly air even in his trouble and anger, and it occurred to him that a blue-coat would be likely to bring about the truce he had suggested.

"If you're bound ter hev one, I'll go," he replied.

He started, but the young man caught him by the collar and flung him violently to the pavement.

"Lie there, meddler!" he exclaimed; and then he ran away down the street at a rapid pace.

The old man did not heed his departure; he was gazing in a bewildered way at Kit Clipper. The latter would not have heeded his fall ordinarily, but his head had struck against the curbstone, and he was half-stunned. He arose slowly and, putting his hand to his head, took it away stained with blood.

He had a bruise just sufficient to start the red fluid, but not of a nature to worry him.

"What next?" the old gentleman uttered.

"The misguided boy is almost a murderer!"

"Not on me; I'm all right," Kit returned, quickly.

"But think what might have happened."

"I'm thinkin' what did happen," Clipper answered, looking toward the corner around which his late assailant was just vanishing.

"You are bleeding."

"An artom."

"Your skull may be fractured!"

"Not a fracture; I'm made o' tough material."

"Horace shall answer for this—he shall be arrested."

"You're too late for your game," observed the cabman, phlegmatically.

The old gentleman had recovered from his bewilderment, and he saw that it was as the man had said. Horace had made good his escape.

"Well, well, it may be best so," he said, with a sigh. "I should dislike to have my sister's son arrested, richly as he deserves it. Let him go, for his own deeds will be his worst accuser and our avenger. But you, my boy—you have been hurt in my service, and must go to my house to be cared for."

Kit Clipper smiled.

"Oh! this don't amount ter nothin'. See! it ain't bled enough ter fill up a moskeeter, an' I don't mind it."

"But you were hurt while helping me—"

"Not at all. I didn't get a chance ter help ye, an' I ain't hurt, nohow. Let it pass! But you'd better keep an eye on yer nephew, fur he's bad clear ter his socks."

"The Sea-Horse Boat Club has been the ruin of him."

Kit's eyes opened widely.

"W'ot did ther Sea-Horses do ter him?"

"He went among evil associates when he made their acquaintance. The club isn't composed of good men. I know, for I live near the boat-house, and I know some of the members, personally or otherwise."

"What might yer name be, sir?"

"Stephen Leechmere. I come of a good family, and there was never a black sheep in it until Horace grew up. He is my deceased sister's son. She married Leander Paulson, and Horace is all that's left. My poor sister was weak and yielding, and her way of dealing with rough Horace when he was a boy has made him what he is. He had his own way then, and the headstrong boy has become a criminal young man. But we wander from the subject. I really desire you to go to my house, my lad."

"All right, sir; jest as you say."

Kit Clipper's sudden change of opinion was not without cause. The moment he heard that Mr. Leechmere lived near the Sea-Horse Boat Club, and knew a good deal about its members, Kit decided to accompany him.

The chance was presented, he thought, for him to make a start in investigating Charles Birdston's case.

The cab still awaited Leechmere's commands, and he and Kit entered and were driven away toward the north. It was a ride of considerable time to the old gentleman's house, but they reached it at last.

When they alighted, Kit cast a quick, earnest glance toward the boat-house. It was a notable feature of North River life at that time—though unknown to the present decade—and had a good situation on the bank of the stream.

In every way it outdid the average boat-house. It was larger, more exclusive in its style of architecture, and, though imposing, a place about which outsiders had never been given any chance to get much information.

To Kit Clipper it looked particularly imposing on this occasion, and as he viewed the grim, secretive walls, it looked just like the proper place for the commission of crime.

CHAPTER II.

ALARMING NEWS.

STEPHEN LEECHMERE led the way into the house.

"I live here with my sister," he explained.

"We are alone except for the two servants we keep. You will not meet with much form and ceremony, for I am opposed to such things. I'll call my sister and have her attend to your hurt—she's very skillful in such matters. Remain here, please, until I summon her."

Kit Clipper did not object, and Leechmere left the room.

The house was one which would average well in New York, without making undue show, and the interior was fairly furnished and very neat.

Leechmere soon returned, accompanied by a lady a few years younger than he. She examined Kit's hurt and pronounced it trifling, but, at her brother's request, washed it well in a skillful way.

While she washed, she talked.

"We may as well let Horace go to ruin if he is to run away with the boat-club boys!" she declared.

"I believe you, Elvira," Leechmere sighed.

"That place is a den of iniquity!"

She ceased work, stretched out one arm toward the boat-house, and looked very dramatic.

"I don't know what we can do about it," her brother admitted.

"If I had my way, the people would rise and

pull the building down, as the French pulled down the Bastille."

"The men would still remain."

"But not their den. Next thing we know, Horace will be a member of the club, and you know my opinion of them."

"Yes."

"The old sea-captains that founded the club were none too good, I can tell you. I've heard it whispered that they had out a pirate craft during the last war, but that may be wrong. Now the young roughs have full sway, and I tell you that there's no good in them!"

"Boat-clubs ain't apt ter be," observed Kit, anxious to lead the lady on to say all that she would.

"Some boat-clubs are all right, and composed of honest young fellows, but not so the Sea-Horse. We are neighbors, and have a chance to notice more than some folks. There are strange goings-on there, and it wouldn't surprise me if stolen property could be found there."

"Ahem!"

Stephen Leechmere cleared his throat suddenly, and gave his sister a warning glance. Kit did not fail to see it, and rightly inferred that the old gentleman did not want to get mixed up with the affairs of the Sea-Horse Boat Club.

"I'd like to know what meant the mason-work done therelately," Miss Leechmere added, evidently determined to have the last word.

"What did they do?" Kit asked.

"Who knows? We don't; but what did they want of vaults and subterranean places?"

"Did they make 'em?" asked the boy, with fast-increasing interest.

"This talk is idle," interrupted Leechmere. "We know positively nothing about the club, and what we suspect is no evidence. Let us not speak of them. They did have some mason-work done, and we saw the mason go in and out—he was a likely young fellow of some twenty-two years—but we never spoke to him; we don't know who he was; we don't know what he did, and are not interested in the affairs of the Sea-Horse Club. All done, Elvira?"

"Yes."

Miss Leechmere had finished her work by putting a piece of court-plaster on Clipper's hurt. The latter had almost forgotten it, but not so the old gentleman.

"It was a cowardly thing to do!" he muttered.

"What shall we hear next of that wretched boy?" added Miss Elvira.

"Anything is liable to come. I tell you that he and his associates of the occasion tried to 'bunco' me. Horace claimed that he wanted to settle down and go into business, and he decoyed me in to use my judgment in the case, as he termed it. Well, my judgment proved better than they expected, and when they laid the trap for my feet—and my money—I saw through it at once. I had money about me, and Horace knew it; and he and his knaves were tempted to take it from me by force. I also saw that plainly, but my bold stand kept them off. You heard me accuse Horace of trying to 'bunco' me."

"And to think that he is the son of our only sister!" sighed Miss Leechmere.

Once more Stephen returned to the injury which Kit had received—this seemed to haunt him more than any of Horace's other misdemeanors.

Kit would have tried to have him drop the subject, but a new idea had entered the boy's mind.

He wanted to know more about the Sea-Horse Boat-House, and did not fail to perceive that he was in just the proper place for observation. Exclusive as the club was, with the high, tight board fence around its premises, the upper windows of Leechmere's house were higher.

It was a fine place for observation.

Could he use it for such a purpose?

"My lad," Stephen went on, "I cannot think of letting you leave us to-night. You may be worse before morning, and I want you where we can care for you."

Kit concealed the twinkle in his eyes.

"I ain't used ter sleepin' in no close room," he answered. "Kin you give me a high, airy room, facin' the water?—an attic, fur instance?"

It was a bold bid, and he waited eagerly for the reply.

"We can give you just what you desire. Come and see the room."

And so Kit followed his new friend, and was led to the upper room at the west end of the house. Between it and the boat-club property

there was a vacant lot, so there was nothing to interrupt the view.

This view was all that could be desired, and he decided not to throw away the chance offered—though what good he was to get out of it he did not know. That the Sea-Horses would parade any of their secrets did not seem likely.

Mr. Leechmere was greatly pleased when his young friend promised to stay, and arrangements were made accordingly.

The amateur detective knew that the less attention he received the more chance he would have to observe, and he acted his part so well that, when he said he was both poor and humble, and would feel more at home in the kitchen than elsewhere, he was allowed to go there.

He found the mistress of that region to be a very black colored woman who rejoiced in the name of Rosebud, and he and she were soon on good terms.

He ate his supper with her, and the evening began.

All this while he had been waiting for a chance to question Rosebud, being well aware that nobody knows more about her neighbors than a female servant.

When he had wholly gained Rosebud's confidence he began operations.

"Mighty fine neighborhood 'round hyar."

"Pooty fair," Rosebud agreed.

"Go inter sassiety much?"

"Course not, wid my black skin."

"Folks pertic'ler 'round hyar, eh?"

"Sorter."

"Got a boat-house over yender, I see."

"Yes."

"Wish I b'longed."

"Don't yer do it!"

"Why not?"

"You'd git gobbled up."

"Ghosts?"

"Wu'ss! I ain't givin' it away, not even ter my boss; but dar is myst'ries in dat 'ar shebang dat would make de police chieftain turn white 'round his gills."

"Gosh ter all hemlocks! you don't say so!"

"What's up, I'd like ter know?"

"I s'pect thar's a man been killed!"

"Who?"

"A mason who worked dar."

The detective's eyes grew larger.

"How's that?"

"A man worked fur them on mason-work, an' den he vanished inter blue smoke. Thar ain't much been done about it, an' no ginerel alarm sent out, I reckon; but he wa'n't never seen ter leab the boat-house one night, when he was through. Good reason why—he didn't leab it!"

"Be you sure?"

"Yes."

"How d'ye know?"

"One reason is dat I didn't see him go, an' another is dat there was strange goin's-on in dat boat-house. While de mason was workin' dere days I could often get glimpses ob him, an' see brick an' mortar; an' some sebr'al times I heerd de clinkin' ob his trowel—you'll notice dis am a very quiet street."

"Well, sah, de night what de mason am said to hab disappeared, I heerd strange sounds in de boat-house, 'long about seven o'clock."

"All had been quiet dar, but I finally heerd voices in loud talk, an' dey seemed to be right mad, too. Yes, sah, it was a querril about su'thin', an' somebody was a-jawin'. Den I heerd one man say: 'Lemme go, scoundrels!'"

"Be you sure?" Kit asked, breathlessly.

"Yes, sah. Den thar was de sound ob a scuffle, an' more voices sounded, an' su'thin' like a chair was knocked over. Den it stopped, an' all become quiet."

"Why ain't you tol' this afore?"

"Well, de Leechmeres had always tol' me not ter meddle wid de Sea-Horses, nor hab anything to do wid 'em; an' dat is just what I hab been doin'."

"But that man may hev been murdered."

"Dat's so, now I think on't."

"You ought ter tol' it, Rosebud."

"I never meddle wid my neighbors."

"But you say this happened at seven o'clock. Didn't the mason go 'way at six?"

"Yes; but I s'pect they kep' him, somehow."

"I reckon he's food fur the fish, 'fore now."

"Don't think so!" declared Rosebud, with an emphatic nod.

"Why not?"

"They has walled him up alive!"

Kit Clipper gazed at the negress in startled amazement. This assertion was even more remarkable than anything he had expected, and it almost took his breath away.

"Dey had him do their work," Rosebud add-

ed, "and then, so he couldn't give away their secrets, bricked him up from all de world."

"How do you know that?"

"Wal, dat same night I speak of, 'long about two hours or so arter de fight, dat trowel got ter goin' ag'in—clink! clink! clink!—an' it kep' it up for a long time until I dropped asleep. Nex' mornin' dere wasn't no work done in de boat-house, an' de trowel ain't sounded sence. Good reason why. The Sea-Horses walled the mason up alive dat night, an' I presume dat he's starved afore now."

Rosebud took a pinch of snuff, leaned back in her chair and assumed an expression of contentment. She had been able to thrill a listener, and pose as the guardian of secrets and tragedies.

CHAPTER III.

AMONG THE SEA-HORSES.

KIT CLIPPER gazed at the negress for some time in silence. He had a mind far more logical than hers, and he was correspondingly less apt to rush to a conclusion, but he could not help being influenced by the testimony he had heard.

His own vague idea that Charles Birdston's disappearance might be due to the Sea-Horses had received confirmation, and he became more earnest than ever.

He questioned Rosebud further, but learned nothing of actual importance.

At an early hour he announced his desire to go to bed, and he was soon in the attic room set apart for him. A few minutes later the room was wrapped in darkness, but the young detective was not in bed.

Instead, he was sitting at the window, fully dressed, with his gaze riveted upon the boat-house.

There was but little to be seen there. It was well lighted, but curtains screened every window, and shut off all survey. It was evident, though, that the Sea-Horses were enjoying themselves, for shouts of laughter occasionally arose.

"Wish I's in thar!" muttered Kit, thoughtfully.

He looked at the high fence, with its crown of spikes. It would be neither easy nor safe to get over, but it was not that which made the detective the most trouble; he had been told that, besides the servants, a watchman was always there to patrol the inclosed area.

Whatever the Sea-Horses might be in point of honor, they seemed to know how to enjoy themselves. They had a social club, as well as a nautical one, and the second floor of their main building was used for the aforesaid social purpose. Every night they met there, old sailors and young recruits, and passed the time hilariously.

If Kit expected them to throw up the window-curtains and parade any of their secrets he was very much disappointed. Noisy as they were, they did nothing suspicious, and, at eleven o'clock, the lights were put out and they went their several ways toward home.

Nobody was left, as far as the spy could see, except the watchman. He made an occasional circuit of the club house, or entered the building where the boats were kept.

After some deliberation Kit opened his door. The Leechmere house was dark and silent. He crept down the stairs, passed out of the rear door, and stood under the clouded sky.

He went at once to the gate by which the Sea-Horses entered their inclosure. It was fastened, and the detective was not able to get any points. He next made his way to the water. The boat-house had a more extensive frontage than similar places of the present day, and all was trim and neat, but every Sea-Horse seemed to have sought his stall.

There was a possibility that Kit could gain entrance at that point, but he would not try it.

If they were otherwise so secretive, it followed that they had some protection there against interlopers.

Kit retraced his steps, but had gone only half-way to Leechmere's house when he suddenly paused.

"What's that?" he muttered.

Sure enough, what was it? A peculiar sound was borne to his hearing.

Clink! clink! clink!

His eyes gleamed with sudden excitement, and to his memory came what Rosebud had said about the sound of a trowel. The peculiar noise made by that implement was not new to Kit. He had heard it before—he heard it now.

But where?

He looked all around without being able

solve that mystery. It was distinct enough, in one sense, yet it seemed strangely muffled.

It sounded as though rising from the ground! When he arrived at this decision he found himself with a good-sized idea. Rosebud had declared that the Sea-Horses had walled the mason up alive. This was only a theory with her, but the detective did not feel like laughing at it.

Certainly, the clinking which he heard rose from the ground, unless he was greatly in error. Who was using a trowel there? What was being done? It was a fascinating subject upon which to meditate, and he hovered over the spot, almost holding his breath in order to hear the more clearly.

Clink! clink!

"It's a trowel, sure pop!" he muttered, "but who in time is usin' it? Ef Charles Birdston is walled up alive, he can't be the one, an' ef they hev got another mason, what do they want o' Charles, anyhow?"

It was easy to ask the question, but hard to answer it. So, too, it was hard to understand the present case. Where was the trowel being used? Kit could not tell whether it was below him, under the sidewalk, or inside the fence.

The whole matter puzzled him. The Sea-Horses had ceased to work, idle and visit for the evening, yet the clinking of the trowel was going on just the same. Or was it his fancy? Willing to take a matter-of-fact view of the case, he tried to believe that the latter was the fact, but found it impossible.

"Ef I ever heerd a trowel, that's one!" he muttered. "Kin it be that Charles is in thar now?"

It was a question which interested him a good deal. Birdston had been his friend, and, if he was in trouble, now was the time to prove his loyalty.

"I'll git inter this ranch ef I kin!" the youth decided, and then he moved toward the river again.

A large-sized sail-boat lay rocking by the pier. Kit decided on two points at once. First, it did not belong to the Sea-Horses; secondly, it was not occupied. Where could he find a better place from which to observe the boat-house?

Acting promptly, he boarded the craft without trouble. It was not in "ship-shape," a good deal of stuff was scattered about the deck, and, among other things, a large pile of old weather-beaten canvas.

This was just what he wanted, and he crawled under so that only his head protruded.

From there he could keep his vigil to his satisfaction, he thought. Several minutes passed without developments. All continued quiet, and his impatience suggested that he had made a vain move.

"Reckon thar ain't no chance but ter climb over the fence, an' that I can't do. Even if I could, the watchman would gobble me up. He would—Hullo! thar he is now!"

A man had come out of the boat-house, and, stopping, was looking around as though to see that all was right.

The detective did not doubt that it was the watchman, but further developments were in order. After a careful survey, the man turned and spoke in a low tone; then other men emerged from the boat-house until seven stood on the pier.

The last six did not stop, but walked quickly forward in a group directly toward Kit. The latter kept quiet under the canvas.

"Lucky this ain't their boat," he thought.

Even as the idea took form one of the men sprung to the boat, and the others promptly followed. Clipper began to feel uneasy.

Was he discovered?

"Get her under way at once, but be quiet about it," said a commanding voice.

The men moved with the celerity of good sailors, and, almost before Kit could realize the situation, the boat was out in the stream and the brisk wind was fanning the unusually broad sail.

The detective saw that he had made a great mistake. The boat was the property of the Sea-Horses; they were off on a voyage; and he was an uninvited passenger! They headed down the stream, and the wind moved them along merrily.

Kit Clipper wished himself back in Stephen Leechmere's house. True, his presence was not suspected, thus far, but that he would escape seemed impossible. The canvas which concealed him was there for some particular purpose, he thought, and, when it was moved, discovery could not but follow.

And when he was found—what then?

He had made up his mind that the Sea-Horses were hard characters, and he expected no gentle usage at their hands. Luckily, he was a good swimmer, and if, when the crisis came, he was able to leap overboard, he would not be without hope.

He peered out of his peculiar refuge at his fellow-voyagers. All were young men, rough of dress and of general appearance, but the darkness would not allow him to discover much of anything else.

One, who seemed to be the leader, stood near the spy.

"It's a good night for the job," he remarked.

"Dark as we could wish," replied one of his companions.

"Yes."

"Hope there won't be any beaks cut."

"No fear; they love their nests too well."

"Pity the canal ain't done."

"It will be, soon."

"I always feel nervous when unloading."

"Oh! there's no danger."

"But a police-boat might stop us."

"Yes."

"It's well that the Sea-Horses stand well."

"I'm not sure that they do," answered the leader, slowly. "Some of our boys are not as wise as they might be, and whatever they do has a bearing on the club. I wish we were more exclusive, but the Board of Directors are easy, and they argue that what we need is bold spirits. That's all right, but no man who drinks whisky and beer too freely is fit for any use. I'm not a saint, but it's a fact that a hard drinker is of no use in this world, whether he's in honest business or delicate work."

"That's a fact."

"Now, there was Ginger George. He was a darling, but he got to drinking too hard, was useless to us, and is now in Sing Sing. All such cases hurt the Sea-Horses, and if too many of them come up, the club will get a bad name."

"Fact, cap'n."

The boat was progressing at good speed, the breeze being all that could be desired. They kept near the middle of the stream, and the captain watched with unflagging care. At rare intervals some other craft was seen, and then they headed away so as to avoid notice.

This remarkable caution added force to what Kit Clipper had seen and heard. Plainly, the Sea-Horses would not be so anxious to preserve secrecy if they had no fear of the law.

Nobody was more interested in their trip than the chance passenger. Sticking his head out of the canvas, like a turtle in its shell, he speculated on the chances.

What was the errand of the Sea-Horses?

What would be done with him when he was found?

Resistance would probably be out of the question, for they were six to one, and each person was larger and older than he.

Their course indicated that they were going on below New York, but when well down, their course was changed and they swiftly approached the Jersey Coast. As they drew near, their watchfulness increased.

"Have you all got your weapons ready?" the captain asked.

There was a general affirmative response.

"Don't use them unless I give the word. We don't want to shed blood if we can help it!"

Kit Clipper drew a long breath. Truly, he was in hard company when they so coolly referred to such lawless matters.

CHAPTER IV.

A MASCOT APPEARS.

"It's some robbery," decided Kit Clipper, as he looked at the dark shore ahead of him. "Mebbe some vessel is ter be gone through. Ef that's the case, I reckon somebody about my size will waltz out o' danger as soon as I kin. Don't want ter be gobbled as one o' the river-pirates!"

Somewhat to his relief, the boat avoided all the larger vessels, and was finally brought up at an old pier which did not seem to be used for anything.

The captain looked sharply toward the land, and a man came out of the darkness and approached them.

"Aho!" called the captain.

"Aho", all!" was the reply.

"How blows the wind?"

"Nor", nor' est."

"How rolls the water?"

"From bow to stern."

After this preliminary the man advanced briskly.

"So it's you, Hamblin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You can go back."

"Eh?"

"No cargo for you."

"How's that?"

"The net has come up empty, or, rather, was never cast. The beaks were too lively."

"The blazes! Were they 'on'?"

"Can't say, but they blocked our game. We didn't dare run the risk, and we were wise in so deciding; but the game isn't up yet. We want that haul, and we'll have it, if you'll give us time."

"Let it alone, if there's danger. You nor we don't want to get into trouble."

"No fear; I won't make a move unless all is safe. I see you brought canvas to cover up the goods, but you'll have to go back with as little as you brought under it."

Kit Clipper smiled grimly; there was more under the canvas than any of the lawless gang suspected.

"It's all right," replied Captain Hamblin, "but we won't come out again until we are notified that you've made a haul. Word may go out that the Sea-Horses are given to night-voyages, and that won't do."

"I see. Well, lay low until you get word from me. Next time, we won't disappoint you."

A little more conversation took place, but it was all on commonplace subjects. Then the man on the pier retreated, the boat was shoved off, and they were soon moving along on the homeward course.

The Sea-Horses were not pleased, and they growled persistently over their ill-luck, though cautious Captain Hamblin was inclined to regard their ally's course with approval. They did not mention the nature of the articles of which they had been disappointed, and the detective was not sure whether the Jerseymen had aimed to rob house, store, bank or vessel.

Straight toward the boat-house they went, and Kit realized that he had an interest in their future movements. The canvas which had thus far concealed him had been put in the craft to cover the illegal goods. These had not been secured, but it was not likely that things would be left as he had found them.

Probably the boat would be housed for the night, and, if it was not, he felt sure that the canvas would not be left in such a dangerous place.

Even thieves must take precautions against other thieves.

This matter became one of vital interest to Kit. If the boat was put away, or the canvas moved, discovery was inevitable.

How was he to save himself?

He had plenty of time to consider this point, and the result was inevitable: the only plan which gave any hope was for him to leave the boat before it touched the pier. This did not give much promise, but it was the only thing he could do.

Having reached this conclusion, he moved at once, but with the utmost care. Slowly, and, as far as was possible, noiselessly, he crawled out from under the canvas. He expected every moment that he would be discovered, but the Sea-Horses were busy with their conversation.

The first step was successfully taken.

He did not see how he could possibly leave the boat undetected, but chance favored him. As they were making the final run for the pier, the craft struck a floating log. As it proved, no injury was thereby sustained, but it sent the Sea-Horses flying about; and, before they had recovered their balance, Kit Clipper whisked over the edge of the boat and dropped lightly into the water.

They righted without trouble, and, unconscious of the fact that they had lost a passenger, reached the pier soon after.

While they were stowing the boat away, they had a watcher in the person of a very wet boy who sat on the adjoining pier and looked and meditated.

"Sea-Sharks ought ter be yer name, by gracious!" he muttered, "fur you are a tough lot. Reg'lar robbers, ef not pirates, hey? Hum! That's a pretty go fur my nat'v city. New York must blush ter hev sech critters. An' the perlece ain't onter the dodge. Wonder ef I'd be b'lieved ef I tol' 'em, or ef they'd be sharp enough ter git proof o' yer iniquities?"

He considered the last possibility for some time, but without acquiring much faith in the blue-coats. Another idea was also strong in his mind.

"Wish I could git in thar openly, somehow. Don't s'pose they'd let me j'ine, but I'd like it."

I could git at their secrets, an' b'jinks! I could find out what means that myster'us clinkin'! Hev they got Charles Birdston, or ain't they?"

It was a question of great interest to him, but one which he could not answer.

"Now, ef I only could j'ine—but I can't. I'm younger than their members, an' I'm small fur my age. Then, ag'in, I don't look half tough enough. Ef I could only git myself up as a rough—but how could I git in then? Tharmust be some way, an' I'll go back ter Stephen Leechmere's an' think it over."

The following day one of the members of the Sea-Horse Boat Club was sitting idly on the pier. He was a stout fellow of twenty years, with a coarse, ignorant, brutal face, and looked like a typical young tough of a city which contained too many of his kind.

Footsteps sounded behind him, and he looked around. A boy was approaching who was superlatively ragged and dirty. He looked to be fourteen years old, and a child of the streets. If he had emerged from a mud-puddle, or a rag-bag no one would have been surprised.

"Hullo, mister!" began this forlorn object.

"Hullo!" growled the Sea-Horse.

"Fishin'?"

"Can't you see I ain't?"

"B'long ter them?"

The portable rag-bag pointed to the boat-house.

"What s'pose I do?"

"Wish I did, too."

"Hum! Pretty figure you would cut thar."

"I kin swim an' row a boat."

"Mebbe you own one," quoth the Sea-Horse, with a sarcastic attempt to be humorous. "Son o' some millionaire, mebbe?"

"Ain't got no dad."

"Sorry fur him?"

"Say, kin I j'ine?"

"J'ine w'ot?"

"Yer boatin'-club."

"Lord, Lord! the likes of you j'ine!"

"But I'm a mascot."

"Oh! you be!"

"Yes."

"You look it."

"I be. I bring good luck ter everybody I hitch up wid. I've been mascot fur a ball-club, an' they won nineteen out o' twenty. Then I was mascot fur the runnin'-hoss, Flipsy Jim, an' he got the boodle ev'ry send-off. Then Mike Kingoran, the Daisy One—he's a prize-fighter—engaged me, an' he won five fights, knockin' out Timborazo Sam, Owney Patch, an' others. Oh, I tell yer I'm a ginerine mascot!"

The speaker thrust his hands deep down in his pockets, puffed out his cheeks, and looked like a hard citizen, generally.

"Kin you use yer dukes, yerself?"

"Try me!"

"I'd break ye in two."

"Not afore I broke you in three!"

"Why, you ain't bigger than a mouse."

"A hornet ain't, but he kin knock out a man bigger nor three like you."

The Sea-Horse had become decidedly interested. He was a hard citizen, himself, and the alleged mascot had hit him hard when he spoke of prize-fighting. It was the Sea-Horse's greatest pleasure in life to hang around the boat-house, read sporting papers of the worst kind, admire their bogus pictures, talk like one well-informed as to "the ring," and be considered tough, generally.

He could not help admiring one who had been mascot for such a great pugilist as Mike Kingoran, the Daisy One.

"W'ot yer name?" he asked.

"Kit Clipper."

"Where d'ye live?"

"In the streets."

"A mascot hadn't ought ter need do that."

"A mascot who takes bigger pay than his keep loses his charm."

"Ah!"

The Sea-Horse looked attentively at the ragged boy. He was impressed with the idea that he had met some one who knew his business.

"So you want ter j'ine the Boat Club as a mascot?" he added, after a thoughtful pause.

"Jes' so."

"Wal, you look O. K., an' I'll try ter git ye the job. Come with me!"

CHAPTER V.

THE MASCOT MEETS AN ENEMY.

KIT CLIPPER experienced a feeling of exhilaration. He had played his part well and assumed a character which he would have de-

spised, naturally, and his efforts were well rewarded, thus far. No Sunday-school boy would have found favor in the eyes of the redoubtable Sea-Horse, if he had been the greatest "mascot" that ever trod the soil or streets of Gotham, but a "tough citizen" was just what the fellow admired.

"Cap'n Hamblin is inside," the Sea-Horse observed. "You shall see him at once. Don't let on that me an' you are new friends, but let me say what I will."

"All right," the boy detective agreed.

"My name is Bat Brogan. Don't forget that!"

"I won't."

Brogan led the way inside. At first the quarters of the Sea-Horses was plain enough, and like the ordinary boat-house, but this soon changed. Leaving the building where the boats and their belongings were stored, they came to a yard of considerable size which was arranged in a neat lawn over its greater part. The high, tight fence before mentioned shut it in from view.

In the center of the inclosure was a good-sized building known as the "club-house." There it was that the Sea-Horses passed their leisure hours.

Brogan conducted Kit there at once.

Youthful Captain Hamblin and two other men were found lounging in a large, pleasant room, which was made agreeable to their taste by a supply of sporting papers, pictures representing nautical scenes upon the walls, a quantity of oars, small anchors and other paraphernalia of the sea. A fine miniature full-rigged ship rested on the table.

Brogan walked up confidently.

"Cap," said he, "here's a friend o' mine, Kit Clipper, by name."

"Um!" muttered Hamblin, ungraciously.

"He's a mascot!"

"Indeed!" quoth the captain, looking at the mascot's rags. "He must be on the downgrade."

"Not much; but he believes that a mascot loses his 'pull' if he takes more than his keep."

"A comfortable theory for those who want a mascot."

"He's served for Mike Kingoran, the Daisy One."

"Has he?"

Hamblin showed interest at last, and Bat Brogan braced up anew.

"Yes; but he's done with Mike, an' now he's lookin' for another job. I'd heard the boys say they wanted a mascot, and I thought my friend was just what was needed. I'll vouch for him!"

In his zeal to carry his point Mr. Brogan was going further than he intended, and was making his statement strong.

"We had been thinking of a mascot," Hamblin admitted.

"Well, here he is."

"Boy, are you a New Yorker?" the captain asked, with all the importance of twenty-one years of life.

"I be that."

"Live with your parents?"

"Ain't got none."

"Are you honest?"

"Boss," quoth Kit, shutting one eye, "I'm true ter my friends. A mascot don't need no more."

All of the tough young men smiled. The reply pleased them more than a certificate of character. Their own natures were so dwarfed that honesty and they were not on good terms, and the mascot, while not overdoing the matter, gave out very skillfully the impression that he was as bad as they liked to see people.

Hamblin kept up the questioning for some time. If Brogan was reckless, such was not the case with the captain. He would not have considered the matter at all had it not been for Brogan's false assertion that he knew the applicant, and, as it was, Hamblin tried to be careful before taking in a stranger.

A mascot the club must have. Some of the younger members really believed in the powers of a "mascot," and others had decided that some ragged, quick-witted young rascal who could amuse them would be a desirable feature of their life.

"But I suppose the old sea-dogs will kick," finally observed the captain, thoughtfully.

This referred to the old ex-salt-water sailors who still belonged to that club.

"Let them growl!" returned Brogan.

"I guess we can smooth it over, and we'll take the kid in if he will mind his own business."

"You'll find me all-wool and a yard wide,"

Kit declared. "All I ask is my grub, a chance ter snooze, an' the rest o' time I'll spend in 'rootin'' fur you an' the club."

"All this is satisfactory, and the boys will expect a good deal from your 'rooting.' We don't row so very many races"—here Hamblin looked at his friends in a peculiar way—"but we have interests to further. 'Root' for our success! During the day you will be around here for the boys to draw inspiration from, or out in one of our boats, as circumstances demand."

"I kin sleep on the bottom of a boat."

"You won't sleep here!"

Hamblin made this statement quickly but quietly. Kit Clipper's face fell, but the captain went on in a matter-of-fact way:

"Before night some one of us will have quarters engaged for you near at hand."

"Kerect!" quoth the mascot, coolly, but, really, a good deal disappointed.

"Now, Bat Brogan," resumed Hamblin, "give your friend in charge of Levi Adonis, and have him shown over the place."

Just as this order was given a negro appeared at one of the side-doors—a very black, plump-looking person of about twenty-five years. Hamblin called him.

"Levi Adonis, this is Kit Clipper," the captain announced.

Levi elevated his nose and looked superciliously at the boy in rags.

"He's a mascot."

Levi's appearance changed suddenly. He bowed very low to Kit.

"Is happy ter meet you, sah," he asserted, with respect and awe.

"Take him with you, and show him over all of the club-house which is open to you."

"Yes, sah," agreed Levi; and then he once more addressed Kit: "Please, sah, ter foller me!"

The boy detective was amused. He saw that the sleek negro was one of those superstitious persons who believed implicitly in the humbug idea of mascots, and his great respect was laughable.

Levi Adonis did his duty well; he could not have done it better if he had the mayor of New York in charge. He showed all the rooms to Kit, and explained the purpose of each. In the kitchen a Cerberus was encountered. This was Wash Adams, the cook, a white-headed negro of great age and corresponding bad temper.

Wash was a crank whose ugliness made Levi's life a burden, and for whom, as a man, the younger colored person felt as much awe as he did toward Kit as a mascot.

"I doan' know whether he will use you wid de respectability due ver or not," Levi remarked, when they had left his fellow-African. "He's a powerful snappish chap, is Wash; an' he may speak sharp to yer."

"Let him wiggle," Kit answered.

"De boys humor him 'cause he's always been yere, an' cooks good grub."

Levi paused, looked thoughtfully at his companion, and then added:

"Kin you hoodoo folks, too?"

"I hev done sich," the detective responded, barely repressing a smile.

"Ef you could hoodoo Wash, it'd be a powerful sight pleasanter fur us all—'specially me."

"I'll think it over."

"Well, sah, you's seen all ob de place."

"We ain't been down-suller."

Kit was not forgetful of the object which had brought him there. He had seen no sign that a mason had been at work above ground lately, so he inferred that Charles Birdston must have labored below. He hoped to get sight of that region, but Levi Adonis shook his head.

"Can't take ye down there."

"No?"

"Nobody goes dar except de Sea-Hosses."

"Private, hey?"

"Yes, sah."

"What sort o' a place is it?"

"Doan' know, 'cause I was never down dar. Wash, he never was, neither. De Sea-Hosses haster have some privacy, an' dat are am de place. I s'pect dar am some wine-sullers, an' de like, but I doan' know. Dar is only a few keys, an' none ob dem goes inter de hands ob de servants."

The opportunity was at hand to ask for information in regard to the mason-work recently done, but the detective was too shrewd to do so then.

Haste might ruin all.

He had gained Levi's good-will, and, indeed, the colored man seemed to be an honest, simple-minded fellow. By using him well enough to gain his good-will, and by keeping up the awe

he had inspired, he might yet find a valuable ally in his new acquaintance.

They returned to the general room.

Of course it was advisable to report to Captain Hamblin, but the mascot had a shock as he walked up to that dignitary. By his side sat a young man who had not been there before, and Kit recognized Horace Paulson.

If the meeting could have been avoided, Kit would not have faced him, but there was no choice. Would Horace remember the boy he had met during his trouble with Stephen Leechmere?

The detective had thought of all this before venturing there. Horace was not a member of the club, but he was a friend of several of the members, and liable to be there at any time. The boy had hoped that chance would keep them apart, but it was not so to be.

Would his rags prove a sufficient disguise?

"Well, mascot," saluted Hamblin, "how do you like it?"

"Prime," Clipper replied.

"Luxurious enough for you?"

"Couldn't be beat."

"I'm glad you approve of it. Paulson, this is our mascot."

"I should say he needs one, himself," Horace replied, superciliously.

"He says a mascot in fine clothes loses his charm."

"Then advise your kid to wear rags. If he were to lose any fraction of his charming appearance he'd be a Sahara desert."

"Oh, he's all right—new pick-up of ours, and a quick-witted lad."

"I've seen him before."

The mascot's heart went down into his boots, metaphorically speaking.

"Where?" Hamblin asked.

"Where was it, boy?" Horace inquired.

"Dunno," Kit replied, nonchalantly. "I've been out o' Sing Sing over three year."

The retort made Paulson's companions laugh, but angered him for a moment. Then he smiled.

"Sharp tongue your kid has. Well, I reckon I must have seen him picking 'snipes' out of the gutter, somewhere. Now were square, boy. Count me in as your protector."

CHAPTER VI.

AN ANGRY WOMAN TELLS SECRETS.

ONE more danger had been passed. Horace had abandoned the effort to remember where he had seen Kit Clipper as a matter too trivial to study upon. Unless future events brought it up afresh he might never know that the young detective was a youth who, having been prostrated by his rough hand, was his natural enemy.

Captain Hamblin turned away from the mascot, and some of the other members began to banter the latter. He had been engaged for that particular purpose and because he was expected to be quick-witted and bright.

Those who now tried to have sport at his expense found him amply quick-witted, but his retorts were so good-natured that their cut had no venom.

The ragamuffin was voted a great acquisition.

After Horace Paulson had gone, Hamblin called Kit to him.

"We will give you board and room near here," he said. "You are to stay there nights only, and be at our disposal from ten o'clock, A. M., to midnight. How does that suit?"

"All correct."

"Then Levi Adonis shall go with you and arrange matters."

Levi was called, duly instructed, given some money and sent off with the mascot.

Kit improved the chance to impress the colored gentleman even more favorably, and found no trouble in doing so. Levi was very good-natured and simple, and, feeling flattered at being treated so well by a mascot, he became Kit's firm friend.

They brought up at a small brick house, and were soon in conversation with the landlady. It proved to be a boarding-house of a low grade, but without signs visible to the casual observer that honesty was lacking.

Neither Mrs. Brown, the landlady, nor her daughter, Sarah, seemed to be opposed to Kit Clipper's rags, and he was soon the tenant of a decent room on the third floor.

Hamblin had told him that he need not report at the club until the next day, and he was soon left alone in his room. He looked it over, and then surveyed his rags in the glass with grim humor.

Never before in his life had he cut such a figure, and he had a good supply of clothes at home, but he enjoyed his situation. Rags carried no disgrace, and he had made his assumed character a success.

Thus far he had learned no more about Charles Birdston or his fate, and the chances did not presage immediate success. With the basement region of the club-house locked up, and Wash there as a guard, he did not see how he was to explore it unless he could play some trick.

This he meant to do, for he was more than ever convinced that the Sea-Horses had done violence to the missing mason.

This opinion received confirmation before he slept that night.

During the rest of the day he heard Mrs. Brown and her daughter moving around the house, but no one came near him until he was summoned to supper. There he met several other boarders, but all were laboring men, and they made no comments on his rags.

An hour later he was about to go out when the door-bell rung and a caller entered. He looked down and was surprised to see Horace Paulson, but Sarah met him with an air of old acquaintance and conducted him up-stairs.

Kit retreated to his room, and they entered that next to it. Their manner was peculiar, indicating that something unusual was afoot, and the self-constituted detective became anxious to overhear what they said.

Between the two rooms was a transom, and, though this was covered over with a cloth, he made an attack upon it at once. The cloth was merely nailed down, and when one nail had been removed, he gained both view and hearing.

Evidently, he had accomplished his work at just the right time.

"Well," said Horace, abruptly, "you sent for me and I have come."

"Yes; I wanted to see you on business."

Neither spoke in an amiable tone; Horace was surly, and Sarah was sharp of voice.

"Fire away," Paulson coarsely added.

"You use nice language for a gentleman!"

"I always did."

"Money don't make the man."

"No, but it makes the woman love him."

"I don't waste any love on you!"

"Turned over a new leaf, eh?"

"It's time I did. Horace Paulson, you thought you were doing something big when you came around and put on airs because you had a rich uncle. Old Leechmere's money was back of you, and I was only a poor girl, and you gave out the impression, by your manner, that it was very kind of you to notice me."

"Wasn't it?"

"No; for I'm your superior in all things but money—so there, now!"

Sarah's eyes flashed, but Kit Clipper began to think he had been decoyed into listening to a mere lovers' quarrel. Horace answered, lazily:

"All right, Sarah."

"It ain't all right!"

"No?"

"You think you can cast me off, now that you are tired of me, but you can't; not by a long shot!"

"What's to hinder?"

"I know too much."

"Or too little."

"Too much, I say—too much for your safety!"

"Oh! come, now, don't fly so high. You don't know anything that can hurt me."

"Don't I? I can tell some things about your high-and-lofty club, the Sea-Horses, that would make good reading in the police reports."

Horace opened his lips to speak, but checked the impulse. It had always been his ambition to belong to the Sea-Horses, but, twice, when his name was presented, he had been black-balled. His friends in the club enabled him to visit there, but he was offensive to so many members that he had but little hope of ever being permitted to join.

He had, however, always led Sarah to believe that he was a member, and, though she knew several of the Sea Horses, and occasionally went there as a visitor, she had not learned the truth.

He decided not to deny it now, but seek for information.

"What do you know about our chaps?" he asked.

"Where's Birdston, the mason?"

Kit Clipper started, but Horace remained impassive.

"Don't know," he replied.

"I do."

"Then why do you ask?"

"The Sea-Horses have murdered him!"

Kit shivered, but Horace remained cunning.

"That's a serious charge to make without proof," he gravely returned.

"Ah! but I have proof!"

"What is it?"

"There's talk about Charles Birdston being missing, and I guess some one could turn a pretty penny by giving some point about him. Well, I might earn that penny if I saw fit."

"How?"

"By telling the police that the mason never left the boat-house."

"Oh! but he did."

"He did not!"

"The boys say he did."

"The boys lie, and you know it!" snapped Sarah, impolitely. "I happened to be in the boat-house, that evening, and nobody can fool me. I went there with Mike Nelligan and John Jenkins, that time. I'd been there about an hour when they excused themselves and left the room where we'd been sitting. I don't believe they had any hand in the 'funny' business, but they left me as I said."

"Go on," urged Horace.

"They left the door open, and I soon heard loud voices. At first I was puzzled, for they sounded muffled-like, but I soon caught on that they came from the basement—a place, by the way, which the Sea-Horses were always very careful I shouldn't go into. What I heard said was this:

"I refuse to accept your offer!" called out a man, in an angry voice.

"We'll make it worth your while," said another voice.

"I won't be the ally of anybody in crooked business!"

"Who is in crooked business?"

"I make no charges, but I have my opinion. I'm done work here. I'm not the man to go running around and tell all that I know, and your secrets are safe, though."

"We think they are. We don't depend on your promise, however. You won't tell on us because you won't be allowed to leave here!"

"What?"

"You know too much, and must pay the penalty of having pried into our secrets."

"It was an accident."

"No matter; you know too much. We hired you as a mason, not as a spy."

"I tell you your secrets are safe."

"We will make them so by keeping you here!"

"You won't keep me here!"

"We shall!"

"How can you do it?"

"By force. You can't, and sha'n't, leave here!"

Sarah had repeated this conversation with more dramatic force than was to be expected from one of her limited intelligence. She spoke rapidly, and Kit Clipper found himself listening with almost breathless attention. Seeing no cause to doubt her word, he believed that he was getting a veracious leaf out of Charles Birdston's experience with the Sea-Horses.

After a pause for breath, Sarah continued:

"Just then a door was closed down below, and I heard no further distinct words. There was an angry murmur of voices, though, and, finally, a crash as though a chair, or table, had been broken to pieces. Then a voice arose in a loud shout, and one terrible word reached my ears:

"Murder!"

Again Sarah paused, and the color came and went in her face in a way which betrayed a good deal of agitation. Horace Paulson faced her in rapt silence, his eyes and mouth wide open. Kit Clipper was not less excited and interested.

"After that," Sarah went on, "there was a sound as though of a struggle, but no more cries. Soon all became quiet, and that was the last of it, as far as I heard or saw. Melligan and Jenkins soon came back to me, but I don't believe they knew about the racket. They didn't mention it, and I didn't, either. Well, sir, that was the afternoon that Charles Birdston disappeared."

Horace remained silent.

"The Sea-Horses have always said that the mason left the place the same as usual that day, but you can't stuff that lie down me."

"What do you think?" asked Paulson, in a careless manner.

Sarah's eyes glittered in hostility.

"I don't think; I know! Birdston met with foul play there that day, and was killed by the members of the boat-club to which you belong!"

CHAPTER VII.

NEED OF MORE DETECTIVE WORK.

THE story was told, and Kit Clipper felt that he had been well rewarded for listening. Sarah spoke without a sign of doubt, and her belief and her narrative only confirmed the amateur detective's own opinion.

Charles Birdston had met with foul play at the hands of the Sea-Horses, after accidentally learning secrets of theirs, and was still in the limits of the boat-house.

Whether he was dead or alive was another question. Sarah believed that he was dead, but the mascot remembered the clinking of the trowel, and did not overlook the strong possibility that the missing man was still alive.

If living, how was he situated?

This was a question which Dick found as puzzling as it was interesting.

Horace Paulson laughed lightly.

"Well, what does all this lead up to?" he inquired.

"I want you to know I'm not to be thrown over!" Sarah declared.

"Oh! you ain't, eh?"

"No, sir. When a rich man seeks a poor girl he only means to amuse himself, but if the girl is at all fly, she will beat him out. I'm going to beat you out! You think you can drop me, now you're tired of me, but you can't. If you try it, I'll give away all the secrets of the Sea-Horses."

"That's just what you've done already, dame!" sneered Horace. "Instead of hurting me, you've done me a favor. I've always told you I belonged to the Sea-Horses, but that wasn't so. Friends I had there let me in as a visitor, but my enemies there wouldn't let me join. Now I have them foul. With what you've told me, they won't dare say no to me."

"I don't believe you!"

"It's a fact."

"Anyhow, you darsent go back on me."

"You don't know my nerve, old lady. What you've told about the Sea-Horses don't affect me in the least, for their jobs ain't mine, and I had just as soon drop you as not, for all you know. But, look ye here, Sarah—you wrong me. I have no more intention of shaking you than I have of flying."

Sarah looked at him doubtfully. She knew very well that he had contemplated casting her off, and, if he had changed his mind, that it was due to her recent revelation.

But was he really inclined to yield, or did he contemplate more treachery?

This was a point which did not interest Kit Clipper, and he was compelled to listen to a long sparring-match of words between the two. It was evident that Sarah was off of about the same piece as Horace, and a schemer devoid of principle.

Whether she held Horace fast or not was a matter of interest only to themselves.

Paulson, however, made no more vicious remarks, but avowing his loyalty to the girl, soothed her as much as possible. All signs of doubt on her part did not vanish, but a reconciliation was effected.

One thing Horace took pains to impress upon the girl, and that was that he was not rich. True, he was the nephew of Stephen Leechmere, but he was on about as bad terms with that gentleman as he could be, and the chances were that he would be cut off entirely in Stephen's will.

If this was done, Horace would remain as he was then—hard-up, and without prospects of anything better.

Sarah did not seem to believe this, but Kit had reason to believe that it was true. Why Horace was so anxious to make the point, if he really intended to become reconciled to Sarah, was not clear, and Kit had a vague suspicion that the unscrupulous young man had some scheme in his mind.

There was nothing more of interest to be heard, so the detective rearranged the cloth and the transom and sat down in his room.

He soon heard Horace go away.

Inactivity did not please the boy mascot, and when the clock struck ten he left the house. He was not certain what he ought to do in the matter of Charles Birdston. The story told by Sarah Brown made it seem almost certain that the mason had met with violence at the hands of the Sea-Horses.

What would the police say to the story?

When this question had been fully considered the mascot decided that it would be useless to go to them. They would not be likely to believe the tale of a jealous woman, and what he had considered the clinking of a trowel would not be more convincing.

"Fact is," muttered the young philosopher, "the perleece kin beas wild as Baron Munchausen, the big liar, when workin' up a theory o' their own, but they don't take much stock in a kid's guess-work. On the whole, I reckon I'll work this case alone. Ef luck comes on't, who gits the glory? Why, K. Clipper, Esquire, to be sure!"

While meditating he had been walking on, and he now reached the neighborhood of the Sea-Horses' quarters. The high fence shut off observation, but he did not doubt that they were making merry inside.

He walked to the north side and listened attentively for the clinking of the trowel, but failed to hear either that or any other suspicious sound.

Finding a suitable place of concealment, he sat down to await the arrival of a later hour.

A little before midnight several men left the boat-house, and this indicated that their meeting of the evening was at an end. Kit wished to prow around the inclosure again, but circumstances prevented. Before he was ready to move, three men advanced and stopped near him.

He was crouching behind a pile of boards, and was not seen at all.

"There ain't any light," observed one.

"Oh! the old folks were in bed hours ago," answered a second man.

"Are they sound sleepers?"

"Yes."

"You are sure of the plan of the house?"

"I ought to be."

"Time was when he didn't need to go there on the sly," put in the third man.

The second speaker muttered a few emphatic words. By that time the detective knew him well; it was Horace Paulson.

"If I had rich folks," remarked Number One, "I wouldn't get 'out' with them."

"Did you ever try?"

"Never had the chance."

"You don't know how the old folks goaded me. They are like some others who are past their own younger days; they don't realize that young bloods must sow their wild oats. Old Leech is rich, and I'd like his money, but I wouldn't sell my manhood for it."

This speech, made with a swagger, came from Horace. He was trying to make capital for himself, but succeeded poorly.

The fact was, he had been a vicious boy, and had gone along the path of evil-doing at a steady pace all his life.

"This ain't to the point," observed Number Three. "We are here to crack a crib."

"I'm all ready," answered Number One.

"Understand," said Horace, somewhat nervously, "there is to be no violence done."

"So you love the old folks still?"

"I love my neck too well to put it in jeopardy."

"No fear; luck always goes with me. I've cracked many a crib, and never made a slump yet."

So declared Number One, whose somewhat domineering manner stamped him as an important figure in the case. He was handling some implement which Kit could not make out clearly, but he suspected that it was a contrivance for lock-picking.

The mascot did not fail to understand the situation. Horace had taken another step on the road of crime, and had gathered experienced knaves to help him rob Stephen Leechmere's house.

Here was something of marked interest, and Kit felt that his duty was plain; he must prevent the robbery. He looked up and down the street for a policeman, but failed to see any.

The burglars moved toward Leechmere's house.

"Shall I hunt for a gavus?" soliloquized Kit. "Like as not I'd be half an hour in findin' one, an' while I was at it, Horace an' his gang would git in their fine work. No, sir; no wild-goose chase fur me; I'll feller close ter the cracksmen's heels, an' I'll bet dollars ag'in' doughnuts that I upset their plans!"

Acting upon this idea, he followed where the trio led, and was soon near the rear door of Leechmere's house. The cracksmen gathered there, while Kit ensconced himself behind the ash-barrel.

Number One applied himself to the task of picking the lock, and it was not long before he succeeded. That he was an old hand at burglarious work was evident.

He then turned to his companions in crime.

"All ready?" he asked.

Both replied affirmatively.

"Got your revolvers at hand?"

"Yes," answered Number Three.

Horace remained silent.

"Don't get in a panic and let them go off by accident."

With this caution, the speaker opened the door.

Kit Clipper's heart beat faster than usual. Despite all that the veteran cracksmen had said, it was clear that a tragedy might follow. They carried revolvers, and the criminal records of New York showed only too plainly that a cornered burglar usually tried to save himself at any cost.

Perhaps Stephen Leechmere would be a victim of this night's work.

The door had been closed behind the trio. Kit waited a little while, and then stole forward. He tried the door, and found that it was unlocked. He entered.

The hall was dark, but a light in advance showed that the cracksmen had ascended to the parlor floor. He crept up the stairs. The trio had entered the parlor, and had gone to work with remarkable celerity.

Leechmere's house could not boast of luxurious or expensive furnishing, but they were finding enough there worth taking to occupy their attention. Various portable articles were being stuffed into a black bag. The old burglar acted as packer, and put all into the smallest possible space.

"No great haul!" he grumbled, as he stowed them away.

"Remember that the real treasures are above, Horace reminded. "Steve's money is worth a hundred cents on the dollar."

"How about his revolver?"

"I told you he had none."

"He may have purchased one recently."

"I don't think so. Anyhow, we are armed, too. Don't load yourself down with this trash, gents."

"You're anxious to get the cold cash."

"That's what I'm here for. A pawnbroker would hardly give you enough for this stuff to buy whisky, but money goes, every time. If we can find the old man's boodle, and he don't wake up, we shall have a fat scoop."

Kit Clipper had an opinion of his own in the case. He did not intend to remain idle and see Leechmere cleaned out, but how he was to proceed he did not yet know. If he exposed himself to Horace's gaze plainly enough to be recognized as the Sea-Horses' mascot his usefulness in that line would be ended, and he could work secretly for Birdston no longer.

He must foil the burglars without being a prominent actor in the foreground of what occurred.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LIFE IN DANGER.

"THAT is enough!"

The old cracksmen pronounced the words after a glance around the parlor, and then gathered up the bag and tied the neck. He had rarely packed stolen plunder of less value, and the haul gave him but little pleasure. He had entered into the robbery only when Horace had urged him persistently, and he was sorry now that he had yielded.

"Are you ready to go up-stairs?"

Horace asked the question nervously. His conscience did not trouble him, but his brave do was not proof against the fear of discovery.

"Yes. Lead on!"

"Can't you go first?"

The cracksmen gave his ally a scornful glance. "You know the house, and I don't. If you want the job done, remember, it is *your* job. If you wish to back out, do it at once."

"I'll lead," muttered Horace.

He took his revolver from his pocket and started. It had been arranged that one man should remain on guard, and the third burglar returned to the basement without any idle talk. Paulson and the old cracksmen ascended the stairs.

Kit Clipper was thankful for the darkness which concealed his movements, and he crept up the stairs after the evil pair.

When they reached the second floor they made a halt and listened. Of course Horace knew where all of the household slept, and the first thing was to satisfy themselves that no one was astir.

While they were settling this point, and listening at the doors, Kit executed a strategic movement. Next to Leechmere's sleeping-room was a second apartment which he used as a sort of library. Double doors connected it with his

sleeping-room, and Kit thought these were never fastened. Moreover, the library, he believed, had nothing of value but books. Certainly, these would not tempt the thieves.

Arguing thus, he glided into the room, and, finding a table he remembered well, concealed himself behind it.

The moon was just right to act a part in the scene, and it threw a long, silvery bar of light on the carpet, one end extending almost to the double doors.

These doors, as Kit could see, were open, but all was dark and silent in Stephen's room.

What would happen next?

The young detective asked the question mentally, and with a good deal of anxiety. His efforts to form a plan of procedure had not resulted in anything more definite than to alarm Leechmere. This he might do at any moment, but he preferred to let the burglars go on for awhile and envelop themselves hopelessly in their web of crime.

Faint whispers came from the hall and showed the burglars in consultation. Then one of them entered the library.

It was Horace Paulson.

No noise betrayed his movements, but, with quick, light steps he moved to the old-fashioned "secretary" which stood near the window. The old cracksmen did not follow, and it appeared that he had remained in the hall, either permanently or temporarily, to watch for possible breakers.

Horace reached the secretary, but turned his face toward the double doors and stood like a statue. Kit read the pause well; the fellow had been astonished to discover that the doors were open, and the fact alarmed him.

No doubt, he realized that no active work could be done until they were closed.

After a long pause, he turned and retraced his steps. Across the carpet he went softly, almost to the hall door. Then he stopped as short as though checked by a heavy hand.

The door was closed!

The fact which startled him was as much of a surprise to Kit Clipper. Horace had left the door open; the mascot had not seen it close, yet closed it was.

Paulson gave every evidence of alarm, but after that involuntary recoil, he started forward again as though an enemy was at his heels.

Only two steps did he go. In his path rose a figure clad in white, and a hand was stretched out in a pantomimic command. The face was in darkness, but it was not hard to comprehend that the new actor in the scene was Stephen Leechmere.

"Stop!" the old gentleman ordered, in a voice which, though low, was eloquent in its way.

Horace stood speechless with dismay.

"You are foiled!" Leechmere added.

Still the profligate and thief had no reply to make.

"You have entered this house to rob me," the uncle went on. "Nobody knows better than you that money and valuable papers have been kept in yonder secretary. You came here hoping to steal them, but you will fail. You cannot have them, even though you and the ruffian in the hall may murder me!"

"I did not mean—we do not want—we came to—to—"

Horace stammered like one bereft of coherent speech, and then came to a halt.

"Proceed!" Leechmere ordered, tersely.

"You are wrong."

"In what?"

"As to why we are here."

"You may say why you came."

"Because—"

The burglar made a desperate attempt to find an excuse, but failed. What explanation could be regarded as likely in the face of the fact that they had broken in?

"Well?" questioned Stephen, sarcastically.

"Hang it all! you're tough on a feller!" growled the young reprobate.

"What do you deserve?"

"Decent treatment."

"Have you accorded me that?"

"Well, hang it! a young feller must sow his wild oats!"

"Misguided boy! To-night sees the fruit of your early rearing. The 'Don'ts!' which you heard from parental lips were either uttered pleadingly, or, if authoritative, were not enforced. You were well started on the road to the gallows, and you have done your best to keep up the pace. Do you take the final step to-night?"

"What do you mean?"

"I have detected you in an attempt at robbery, and intend to hand you over to the police!"

Horace's eyes flashed.

"Don't you dare try it!" he exclaimed.

"Why not?"

"Because, if you do, I'll—"

"What?" calmly asked Leechmere, as the hot-tempered man paused.

"Don't ask me!" Paulson growled.

"I can surmise. With your ruffians at your back you think you can rule here, and, rather than be arrested—perhaps, rather than be baffled in your attempt at robbery—you would murder me!"

"Then let me alone!"

"I insist upon seeing you arrested!" Leechmere returned, in an inexorable voice.

There was a pause, and Kit Clipper scarcely ventured to breathe. He realized that the old gentleman was immovable, and, having seen so much of the burglars, he knew that they were dangerous men. Woe be to Stephen Leechmere in the collision which must come, unless chance was unexpectedly on his side.

Paulson was in a dangerous mood. Perhaps he meditated an attack upon his uncle, but it was not destined to come as he would naturally plan.

There was a clicking of the lock of the door, and all realized that the old cracksmen was trying to force back the bolt, enter and join his ally.

Leechmere sprung toward the door, but he thereby left himself unguarded. Horace, too, leaped forward, and he caught his uncle's arm before the latter could reach the door.

Realizing that his one hope of escape was to get help from his ally, he lost all control over his evil passions, and made a long stride toward attaining the infamy that had attached to burglars before then by adding murder to the lesser crime of housebreaking.

He pulled the old man violently back.

"Perdition seize you!" he hissed, "you want to look out for yourself!"

"Scoundrel, unhand me!" Leechmere exclaimed.

"To let you send me up? Never! You're bound to ruin me if you can, and you shall take the consequences!"

So saying he flung his uncle to the floor, and then, standing over him with his face distorted with fury, raised his hand to strike a blow.

CHAPTER IX.

FIGHTING THE BURGLARS.

THUS far Kit Clipper had been an idle, but not a disinterested spectator. Events had pressed so rapidly upon each other that he had not moved, but now he realized that Stephen Leechmere's life was in danger.

Young Paulson's hand was empty, but the first blow might be followed by others, and the detective had ample proof that the desperate housebreaker was armed.

With a few quick steps he had left his place of hiding, and, when Horace's hand was drawn back for the blow, he caught it and spoiled the ruffian's purpose.

"Stop!" Kit uttered, in a voice which sounded strange even to himself.

Horace turned. The light merely revealed the fact that another figure was there, but did not enable him to recognize the interferer.

It showed, however, that his own danger was even greater than he had thought, and he wrenched his arm away and plunged his hand into his pocket. It came out grasping a revolver, and his purpose was strong to use it.

Leechmere sounded a startled warning, but Kit was fully equal to the task he had undertaken. He struck Paulson's arm a heavy blow, and the revolver went rolling across the floor.

But this step was not enough. Horace was much the stronger of the two, and only ready action could avert a tragedy. Kit remembered the fall his enemy had once given him, and did not hesitate to return it now. He struck Paulson with all the force he could command, and the would-be assassin measured his length on the floor.

But the danger was not over.

The clicking at the door had continued, and the latter now swung open. The old cracksmen entered, and the moonlight, falling upon his hand, revealed a revolver there.

He was ready to back up his younger ally at any cost.

Kit Clipper had gained fresh confidence since his first victory, and he darted upon the cracksmen. The latter's gaze had first fallen upon Leechmere, and an attack from another source was not to be expected.

The mascot did two things in rapid succession.

First, he wrested the revolver away.

Next, he flung his arms around the cracksmen's neck and tripped him neatly, falling heavily upon him intentionally.

"Quick!" he then cried, to Leechmere, "don't let him get away!"

The master of the house responded commendably to the call. He threw his weight upon the burglar's neck and held him so that he was not able to put out his strength to advantage.

Yet, the intruder did not yield tamely. His courage was good, and abundant gray hairs did not prove that his strength was all gone. He struggled, and Leechmere and Kit had their hands full to keep him down. As it was he whirled them around in various wild circles and angles, and Kit expected every moment that he would get the advantage.

Another thing was upon the mascot's mind.

Where was Horace Paulson?

Every one of the aforesaid moments he expected to feel Horace's heavy hand, but the dreaded interruption did not come.

Kit saw that Leechmere was growing weak, but, just as the fight grew more critical, the boy saw something else. Glittering in the bar of moonlight was the revolver he had wrested from the intruder, and which had dropped to the floor.

It was only a moment's work to catch it up, raise the hammer and turn it upon the old cracksmen.

"Yield!" exclaimed Kit, in a voice low but intense. "Surrender, or I'll shoot!"

The burglar at once ceased struggling.

"D'ye mean business?" he coolly asked.

"I do."

"But you wouldn't shoot a man, eh?"

"I'd shoot a wretch like you!"

"Sonny, don't do it; you'd be sorry in after years. For your sake—to keep you out of crime—I'll do as you say. I'm too old to kick about here all night, anyhow. I'll yield, and do you bear witness that I do it gracefully."

"Don't turn the revolver away!" ordered Leechmere, pantingly.

"I certainly shall not."

"Oh! I guess the young chicken is fly enough," added the cracksmen, calmly. "He impresses me as a fellow of wit and nerve. Wish I could say as much for—"

He paused and looked around the room. It was plain that his thoughts were dwelling upon his confederate. Horace was not forgotten by the others, and Leechmere hastened to light the gas. Young Paulson was not visible.

The old cracksmen's lips curled scornfully.

"The cowardly cur!" he muttered.

Kit threw up the back window, and saw the other two burglars hastening away. Neither carried a pack, and it appeared that they had gone in such haste as to abandon what had been gathered before.

The mascot quickly made known the situation and asked Leechmere's advice.

"Let them go," was the reply. "We should lose them if we did give an alarm, and we may as well keep quiet. I think my wretched nephew can be located afterward."

"I, for one, will help you," growled the old burglar. "He coaxed me into this—not that I was too good, but I thought the game too small for the hunting—and now he's abandoned me. Destruction take the coward! I could wring his neck with pleasure!"

There could be no doubt that his expressed disgust was sincere. He made no claim for himself, and accepted his lot philosophically, but the treachery of the man who had enticed him into the burglary filled him with anger.

Kit noticed that Leechmere was regarding the cracksmen in a strangely attentive way.

"The kid and I are done!" the housebreaker added.

"Man, who are you?" Leechmere demanded.

"Me? Oh! I'm John Smith."

"You have another name."

"Have I?"

"I've heard of a burglar in days past."

"Such things are possible."

"His name was Dan Decker."

"A good name!"

"You are Dan Decker!"

The cracksmen laughed lightly.

"Perhaps you know me better than I do myself."

"I know you well, and it brings the past back vividly. Another robbery comes to my mind, and you were the central figure in it—you and a wretched servant-girl whose weak mind was not proof against your arts. She was trusted by her employers; by undermining her

honesty, you made the robbery possible—you accomplished it!"

"Old gent, you're on the wrong tack."

"I am right."

"Oh! well, it ain't worth talking about," the cracksman answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"It is worth it, for you owe the law a good deal, sir."

"The debt won't be paid."

"Why not?"

"You forget that if you haul me into court, your amiable nephew must suffer, also."

"Nothing would please me more. Ever since Horace Paulson was a mere child he has been a source of trouble to me. I have worked for him, paid money to get him out of scrapes, tried to lead him in wiser ways, and forgiven countless sins. Some time since I abandoned him entirely, as one out of salvation's reach. To-night he drew a revolver upon me, and now I hope that he will soon be under arrest."

"At all events, I shall save my own neck," Decker boldly declared.

"How?"

"I'll show you, later."

"Empty talk!"

"I may yet convince you that I know more about your family than you think. The mere fact that I have been out of your sight for a score of years proves nothing; it isn't always those nearest the throne that knows a monarch's secrets best!"

Decker chuckled. Leechmere looked at him critically. Did the man really hold a secret, or was all this said merely to influence him? He could not see what the old cracksman should know that was of importance, and shaking his head, he turned away.

"We'll make a quiet survey here," he observed, to Kit Clipper, "and then, as I don't want to awaken my sister, lead the prisoner out and deliver him to a policeman."

CHAPTER X.

THE SEA-HORSES HAVE WORK TO DO.

DAN DECKER was the calmest person there. He sat on the floor in a careless fashion, as though the progress of events did not concern him in the least. The revolver still menaced him, but it caused him no apprehension.

If it occurred to him that it might be discharged accidentally, and thereby wind up his career, the fact did not seem to trouble him.

"In the closet, yonder," added Leechmere, "there are some stout packing-cords. They are just as good to bind our man as ropes, and we will use them."

He walked to the closet and secured the cords. Returning, he prepared to apply them.

"Keep the revolver bearing upon him," was the next direction.

"You bet!" Kit Clipper answered.

All this was well enough, but they had to deal with a man quite as shrewd as themselves, and far more experienced in ways of cunning.

Quiet as Decker was, he was only waiting for a chance to move, and the chance was soon given. As Leechmere knelt down to begin his work he thoughtlessly brought himself between the cracksman and the revolver. That was Dan's chance, and he moved with surprising agility.

Flinging out his hands he met Leechmere's body and flung him forcibly back—so forcibly that the burglar's two enemies collided, and then fell over like well-bowed ten-pins.

The Mascot was alarmed, but he managed to cling to the revolver, and made a great effort to get upon his feet. This was not at once successful; Leechmere's whole weight was upon him, and it was not easy to get rid of it.

When he had wriggled out he sprang up and looked for Dan Decker, but the cracksman was not to be seen. Kit ran to the hall and listened; he could barely hear the man's footsteps in retreat. Then a door opened and shut, and it was clear that he had reached the open air.

Leechmere came to Kit's side.

"We can catch him yet!" the latter exclaimed.

"Let him go."

"But that ain't right."

"What do we care?"

"He may come again."

"Let him come!"

The old gentleman spoke gloomily; then, noticing the boy's wandering gaze, he added:

"You are young, and cannot understand how sorrow and misery crushes the human heart. If the time ever comes when you hail death as a relief from unsupportable trouble, you will understand better God pity whoever sees every life-hope blasted!"

Clasping his hands, the speaker was walking

back and forth in a mood in keeping with his words.

Kit looked wishfully down the stairs. He disliked very much to see the whole gang escape after all he had done to baffle and capture them.

"This is a miserable state of affairs," pursued Leechmere. "Knave that Horace Paulson is, he is the son of my sister. You cannot surmise how much that means. Blood is thicker than water, runs the old saying, and though I would gladly see the man in prison, I cannot forget that he is *her* son!"

"You must forget."

"Impossible!"

"Bear in mind he drew a revolver on ye!"

"Ay, ay; I am well aware of that, but if he had killed me, the tie of relationship would have remained. Let it pass, though. Tell me, my lad, how you chanced again to become my helper."

Kit told the story. He had no intention of going into details which would bring the Sea-Horse Boat Club into prominence, but, commencing with the statement that he chanced to be on the street, he told how he had overheard the conversation of the burglars and taken measures to baffle them.

He was thanked warmly, for Stephen Leechmere was quick to appreciate any favor. Kit's rags then caught his attention.

"You seem to have fallen into hard luck since I saw you."

"Why?"

"You were comfortably dressed then. Now you are in a state of advanced dilapidation. Why is this?"

Kit had not anticipated this question, and he found it hard to make a reply suitable to the occasion, but he managed to quiet Leechmere's rising pity. He was asked to remain in the house, but when he said that he had comfortable quarters at his disposal, he was not urged. The master of the house wished to keep the events of the night from the knowledge of his sister.

After a short delay the mascot left the house and returned to Mrs. Brown's.

He saw nothing of the baffled burglars on the way.

The remainder of the night passed peacefully, and Kit did not fail to get a due share of sleep. He had barely finished breakfast, the next morning, when he received notice to appear at the boat-house at ten o'clock.

The call naturally started the mental inquiry: Could it be that Horace knew who had made the trouble the previous night? Had he betrayed the mascot to the Sea-Horses? Did a trap await the boy detective there?

All these things were possible, but Kit Clipper was not to be frightened off. He determined to obey the call, let come what might.

He went, but found no verification of his fears. Captain Hamblin and his fellow-roughs were there, and so were several of the old sea-dogs—the founders of the club. These men were aged and gray, and as loud-voiced and rough as could be imagined, but they did not differ greatly in appearance from other sailors.

Several times during the forenoon, Kit suspected that he was under analysis. A good many questions were asked him in a very sly fashion which seemed calculated to draw him out.

In plain words, he believed that the Sea-Horses wanted to know just how big a rascal he was, and he did not disappoint them. Cunningly avoiding the danger he might meet by going to an extreme, he contrived to give out the impression that he was not troubled with a conscience.

Kit was well entertained that forenoon. All kinds of fruit were at his disposal, and in various other ways he was made to feel the Sea-Horses' kindness.

Finally, Captain Hamblin took him in hand.

"How do you like here?" he asked.

"Prime!"

"As well as your former places?"

"Better! Reckon boatin' is jest the biz fur me."

"Would you like to go out on a cruise?"

"You bet!"

"We want all men to be true."

"You kin depend on me."

"To keep our secrets?"

"Ev'ry one, cap'n."

"We'll test you!"

Kit looked innocent and unsuspecting.

"I'm yer huckleberry," he asserted.

"Well, what if there was more money to be made by going against us?"

"Cap, my perfesh'nal character is at stake

when I ketch on anywhar as a mascot, an' I'd sooner hev my toe-nails pulled out than go back on my bosses; an' no mascot kin hold his charm if ye pull out his toe-nails!"

This information was given with a very serious air, and Hamblin smiled.

"All right, my boy; you shall go with us on the trip. I think you are true-blue."

"Bet yer life, cap'n!"

No further points were given the mascot, and he found the remainder of the day far from inclined to pass rapidly. He did not like the idea of going with the Sea-Horses, for he felt next to positive that some lawless deed was contemplated. True, it might end in his having the band completely in his power—if he came out all right.

If there was a general capture, and he was included in it, it would be hard to prove that he was there as an amateur detective.

Much to Kit's relief, Horace Paulson did not appear at the club-house during the day.

That evening the Sea-Horses assumed a new air, and one that presaged events of importance. Men talked with each other in low voices, and an occasional burst of gayety did not throw off the sober demeanor which would occasionally settle upon them.

Evidently, they were going to take some unusual risk.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MASCOT CLIMBS.

TWELVE o'clock found Kit Clipper nodding in his chair like one asleep. Really, he was never further from that condition, and was watching and listening to the extent of his ability. The Sea-Horses little suspected how keenly they were being spied upon, but their Mascot was not satisfied with the progress he was making.

As the clock told the midnight hour Bat Brogan advanced and shook Kit by the arm.

"All alive, mascot!" he exclaimed.

The detective started up, rubbing his eyes.

"Eh?" he replied.

"We're off, my hearty. Follow me, and we'll soon be afloat. Hooray for a life on the ocean wave!"

"Ay, ay!" Kit responded. "Whoop her up, Eliza Jane!"

"Come on!"

Brogan led the way to the boat-house, and Clipper found a large sailing-craft rocking beside the pier. A dozen men stood ready to go aboard, and this was done without delay. Very little was said, but Brogan pushed the mascot along and sat down beside him in the boat.

Five minutes later they were moving up the North River before a brisk breeze.

The night was favorable for whatever scheme they had in mind. The sky was overcast, and fog hung over the river sufficiently to veil their movements to a great extent. From the first these movements were stealthy. They made for the middle of the stream, and then continued there except when another craft was sighted. Then they dodged cleverly, and in all ways took pains not to have it known they were abroad.

Kit Clipper was glad that he was no longer addressed and expected to reply in a humorous way befitting a mascot; he realized that the adventure was a serious one, and was glad to be left alone.

He could not help thinking how surprised the Sea-Horses would be if he made it known that the voyage was not the first he had taken in their company.

He hoped the present one would end as tamely as the first.

For a comparatively long time they sailed north. The city was left behind, and human habitations grew fewer by the way. At last they came to a stop at a bluff on the eastern bank. There the boat was left in charge of two men, and the others continued their way.

Kit had been afraid that he might be left in the boat, but such was not the intention of the Sea-Horses; they wanted to so connect their mascot with some one criminal operation that he would not dare to betray them even if he was so inclined.

They ascended the bank, and Kit saw a small village of scattered houses and other buildings. They moved along the southern edge of the place, but finally paused in a small grove.

Each man fixed his gaze upon the nearest building.

It was a large, low, long structure, and the boy realized that it was some kind of manufacturing establishment. No light was visible.

"All quiet," observed Hamblin.

"Judging by the time, I should say the watchman had just made his round," a second Sea-Horse added.

"Then we'll move at once. Come on!"

They advanced in a body until they stood under the south wall of the building.

One of the party then shook out something he had carried in a compact bundle, and Kit saw that it was a rope-ladder. To one end was attached a small cord, and this Hamblin proceeded to tie around the mascot's waist.

"What's that for?" Kit asked.

"You'll see directly."

The Sea-Horse finished his work, and then laid his hand upon a lightning-rod which rose by the building's side.

"Climb that!" he directed.

"Eh?" the mascot repeated.

"Climb that rod!"

"What for?"

"I want you to reach the upper-story window, pull up the ladder, fasten one end there, and so give us a chance to get up. See?"

Kit Clipper understood only too plainly. Principally because he was the lightest weight there, a task had been laid out for him which would make the rest easy, and make him an accomplice.

The idea startled him, and he saw himself in the closest of close corners. Either he must give actual aid to the gang, or, by backing down squarely, betray himself.

What was he to do?

One plan occurred to him. That was to ascend as they wished, and thereby secure his own safety, and then give the alarm and baffle them; but, if he did this, farewell to his connection with the club, and his hopes of solving Charles Birdston's fate.

Truly, he was in a dilemma.

How could he get out of it?

"Climb!" Hamblin ordered.

"Don't b'lieve I kin, cap'n."

"Nonsense!"

"I ain't no great o' a climber."

"Any boy could do it."

"Wal, what one boy kin do, I kin!"

This declaration, resolutely made, brought a general expression of approval from the Sea-Horses, but the mascot was not of their mind. Come what might, he was resolved not to be a party to their crimes.

He could see but one way out of it, and that one way appeared to him like the star of hope.

He grasped the rod and tested its strength skillfully; then he began to climb. From the first he made awkward work of it. He was careful not to make any sound, and thereby arouse the Sea-Horses' suspicions; but if he had weighed three times as much as he did, he could not have had more trouble, in appearance, than he now did to draw himself up.

He progressed for some time, however, and rose five feet from the ground. The Sea-Horses stood looking on in mingled doubt and dissatisfaction. Their mascot was not showing the agility which they had expected, but all might end well.

Suddenly, though, Kit was seen to slip, and then he fell unchecked to the ground, grasping wildly for support he did not gain.

He landed in a heap, and then groaned lugubriously.

"What's the matter?" Hamblin asked.

"My arm's broke."

"No!"

"Yes, 'tis—ouch! don't tech me!"

The wily mascot groaned again and caressed his alleged injury gingerly. Of course it was all a sham, but that was his scheme for getting out of the responsible part of the robbery.

"Confound it! why were you so clumsy?"

"I slipped."

"You had no business to slip."

"D'ye think that rod is easy ter hold on ter?"

"Well, well, let it pass. Is your arm hurt so you can't go up?"

Kit stretched out the member indicated, and then uttered an exclamation of pain.

"Couldn't lift a muskeeter with it," he replied. "It ain't broke, but it's sprained the wuss' way."

"That settles it. Brogan, you may go up."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to surround the building?" Bat asked.

"Perhaps so—at least, we might throw out pickets to see that all is right. Peters, go to the east end, and you, Deegan, to the west. Kit Clipper, you may have the north side."

It was clear that the Sea-Horses intended to draw their mascot into the case, sprained arm or no sprained arm, and that astute youth did not object. Indeed, if he must be concerned in the

matter, he knew of no place more to his taste than to be a picket.

He was still caressing the arm which he claimed to have injured, and he held the elbow up with the other hand and readily agreed to the last direction.

Obediently enough, he passed around the building.

When he reached the front he made a discovery. The door was open, and two persons, both of whom were men, stood there in conversation. He realized that one was the watchman, while the other seemed to be a caller.

Here was a chance to give the alarm without necessarily betraying himself to the Sea-Horses, and he was about to hurry forward when he heard a step behind him.

He turned and saw the man Deegan.

Evidently, he had a spy upon his own movements, but he was equal to the emergency. Promptly he beckoned to the Sea-Horse, and the latter came forward.

Again Kit looked at the men by the door, and a surprising discovery followed.

One of them was Dan Decker, the cracksmen!

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER FIRE.

THE last discovery bewildered Kit Clipper. It was not strange that the old burglar should be in that town, for any one engaged in his lawless calling was liable to be anywhere; but what meant the fact that he was in conversation with the watchman?

No good ever kept Dan Decker company, and it did not seem likely that he had any good errand there. What did it mean?

"Was he an ally of the watchman?"

Or was he trying to hoodwink that person?

Was another robbery intended?

Deegan touched Kit's arm.

"We've got to wait," he announced. "Times ain't ripe for no move on our part, so we must lay low fur awhile. You stay here, an' I'll go an' tell the cap'n ter call off his war-dogs fur awhile."

"All right!"

Kit answered mechanically, for he had discovered that he could overhear what Decker and the watchman were saying, and, when Deegan retreated, the mascot sunk down by the corner of the building and lay as quietly as the foundation.

The first distinct words he heard were from Decker's lips.

"No; I won't mention any name," the old cracksmen was saying, "but I can do all I claim. You tickle me, and I'll tickle you."

"I can't believe what you allege," the watchman replied, slowly.

"Why not? Ain't I—"

"Why should any money be due me?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"Because all my relations are, and were, poor."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

Decker chuckled.

"You mean that you *think* you are sure. There are lots of things in this world that we don't know, though, and you are liable to be surprised. In fact, I promise to surprise you if I am paid for it."

"How are you going to prove all this?" the watchman asked, doubtfully.

"Trust me for that. All you have to do is to agree to give me five thousand dollars if I get fifty, or more, thousand for you—this, and keep your promise."

"Do you claim that I am heir to this amount?"

"I claim that it's yours."

"Who holds it now?"

"A secret told is worth no gold. If I give myself all away, there would be no use for me in the game. I tell you frankly that I am the only one who has any knowledge of the affair, and the only one who can get you any boodle. Query: Are you willing to pay me for it?"

"I won't make any bargain in the dark."

"You're as stubborn as a mule!" Decker exclaimed, in disgust. "Well, I'll give you a clew, but don't you think you can beat me out. Now, then, suppose that you are not Irad Bease, son of John and Ann Bease, but a cat of entirely different color?"

"You start off wildly, stranger."

"Then you think you are Irad Bease?"

"I know I am."

"Having your father or mother to prove it?"

"My mother died when I was an infant; my father died three years ago."

"I knew them both, though my acquaintance with John Bease was only casual. Ann, his wife, I knew well previous to her marriage. Possibly you've been taught to revere her, Irad, but I must say that Ann was a hard lot. She never was worthy of poor old John Bease, and she proved it by duping him the worst way. You were no child of theirs!"

"Prove it!"

"I can, when I get ready. I can produce Ann's son—a fit offspring of the mother, and a kid for whom you were swapped when your teeth could hardly win in a competition with a hen's."

"Why should such a swap have been made?"

Irad Bease asked the question with more interest than he had yet shown, and Dan showed corresponding gratification.

"I've told you," he answered, "that there was money in the case."

"You are putting in a claim which sounds like a fairy tale, but I remember it was always said that I did not resemble John Bease."

"Naturally, you didn't."

"If he was not my father, who was?"

"It will cost you five thousand dollars to know!"

"I can't produce one-twentieth part of it."

"You need not pay a red until you get your money, though I shall take good care to protect myself. I'll arrange all that, and advance you some money, if you want. You can't be getting any big boodle here as night-watchman, and may not be rich. Well, just you stray down to New York and I'll fix you all right!"

"I'll do it."

"Good! Another fellow is now in your shoes, but he don't fill them; and it won't be hard to fire him out. He's got his nearest relatives—or, to be more exact, *your* nearest relatives—down on him, and a recent attempt to rob the old man has fixed his mind so he would jump at the chance to swap nephews."

"What old man is this you refer to?"

"Don't you wish you knew?" laughed Decker.

"Well, it must be a secret for now; I'm the only person who can tell."

Kit Clipper was not so sure of that. He recognized certain points which agreed with the Leechmere case, and also remembered that Stephen had spoken to Decker about a servant-girl toward whom he seemed to feel no kindness.

"Reckon I will take a shy at Irad Bease!" muttered the young detective.

At that moment something drew his attention to a point beyond the two men. A dark figure was creeping along close to the building, steadily drawing nearer to Bease and Decker.

Then a hand was laid on Kit's shoulder. He turned and saw Deegan.

"Come back, mascot!" the Sea-Horse directed.

Other men were there, and Kit did not fail to comprehend the situation; the Sea-Horses had decided to risk all in a rush for the open door.

Unfortunately for them, they had one person to deal with who was just as sharp as themselves. Dan Decker lived a life where he was obliged at all times to watch closely, and he saw the skulking figure.

"Ware hawks!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Look out for Number One!"

So saying he darted away at full speed, his legs playing in a fashion that showed them in good light when it was remembered that they had already carried Daniel nearly threescore of years.

Irad Bease did not follow him. He sprang back into the building, and the door clanged to as soon as he could fling it into place.

Exclamations arose from the Sea-Horses which were not in keeping with church rules, and they rushed to the attack like hungry wolves. That door must be forced before it could be secured, or the chances were decidedly in favor of defeat.

Bang!—bang!—bang!

One after another, they hurled themselves against the door, and each shock brought an audible sound, but they might as well have spared their labor. The agile watchman had secured the door, and it did not yield in the least.

"Done up!" growled Deegan, savagely.

"By my life! I'll have him yet!" Captain Hamblin cried. "Bring a log—stone—anything with which we can batter down the door. We'll silence the watchman before he can give the alarm. Quick!"

The plan was good, but it did not work. An

upper window was raised, and, before the startled Sea-Horses realized what was intended, a revolver began to work rapidly.

Shot after shot was fired, and no bullet went far from the target. One passed so near Kit Clipper's head that its whistle was very plain to him, and a second cut through Bat Brogan's arm.

It seemed almost impossible that one man was doing all the damage.

That fusillade settled the matter as far as any robbery was concerned; it not only showed that a stout-hearted defender was inside, but the sound would inevitably bring assistance in a short time.

"Break away!" Hamblin called out; and at the command the Sea-Horses took to their heels willingly and ran at full speed.

Kit Clipper was not a rear guard. As he was mixed up in the affair, his safest course was to get back to New York as soon as possible.

It was not far to where their boat had been left, and they went tumbling, scrambling and rattling down the bluff in a way which almost frightened their waiting comrades out of their wits.

Never before had the Sea-Horses got under way as expeditiously as they did then. Sounds of alarm in the rear gave them an impetus, as it were, and they were soon afloat and making away from land.

But they were not to escape tamely.

They were near the middle of the stream when a hoarse hail drew their attention to one side, and they saw two other boats ride out of the fog.

"Boat ahoy!" added the man who had hailed before.

Not a word answered the Sea-Horses. A brisk breeze was fanning their sail, and they were as anxious to leave those waters as was Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner."

The noise in the village and the silent flight of the boat, told a story to the other crews, and in short order their crafts were pointed in pursuit.

Down the river went the three at full speed.

Bat Brogan shook Kit by the arm.

"Now, mascot," he cried, "show us your arts. If you are what you claim, bring us luck an' get us out o' this danger!"

The mascot started nervously, for he saw capture and disgrace staring him in the face, but he rallied nobly to meet the crisis. He sent back a joke, and a cheerful assurance that all would end well.

But soon another danger menaced them.

The pursuers were armed, and they took revenge for their disregarded hails by opening fire upon the fugitives. Bullets splashed the water all around the foremost craft, and one lump of lead found lodging-place in a Sea-Horse's leg.

Kit Clipper plainly saw that cruising with the modern pirates was no joking matter, and he vowed that if he escaped arrest for the present offense, he would never risk his liberty and reputation on another voyage.

If captured with them, nothing could save him from being regarded as one of the band, and as guilty as they were.

In such a case, amateur detective-craft would meet with a downfall.

The pursuers evidently exhausted their ammunition in a short time, and their revolvers were put away, but the race did not end. Fathom after fathom they raced down the Hudson, but the Sea-Horses were not yet at the end of their rope.

Little by little they gained on the pursuers—so slowly that the advantage in each minute was imperceptible—but so surely that, at last, running in deeper fog, they shook the enemy off and made good their escape.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE UNDERGROUND REGIONS.

It was the following evening, and Kit Clipper was in the Sea-Horse Club-House. The day had been very quiet and uneventful, and the persons who had participated in the adventure of the previous night had kept close to their quarters.

As far as Kit knew, there was no reason to suppose that suspicion was directed toward the Sea-Horses. They had made the return trip successfully after shaking off the pursuers, and if their luck was in keeping with that of the past, they had no cause for fear.

For years the gang had been at work, and most wonderful fortune had attended their efforts, no great shadow having been cast upon the club.

As for Kit Clipper, there were some who

spoke skeptically of his powers as a mascot, but no one who doubted him. He redoubled his efforts to make himself agreeable, and was universally regarded as a very "good fellow."

Despite this, he would not have been there that night had it not been for an unexpected circumstance. He was tired of mixing with burglars and thieves, but he saw his way, at last, to sever the connection in a manner which would please him better than to step out without further adventure.

During the day he noticed Wash, the old colored cook, come out of the mysterious basement, lock the door and secrete the key in a place which seemed to be perfectly safe. This was contrary to Levi Adonis's understanding of the arrangement, for the second colored man had plainly stated that the cook was not allowed down there; but Kit was not surprised to learn that Wash was villain enough so that the Sea-Horses were willing to trust him.

Having learned where the key was kept, Kit resolved to remain awhile longer and make a bold attempt to see the basement.

It was a risky piece of work, but his courage was good.

One other incident should be mentioned. Levi Adonis came to grief during the day. He incurred the anger of a leading Sea-Horse, and was rewarded by the application of a cane in chastisement. He appealed to the old sailors and Hamblin, but the matter ended in his discharge.

This seemed a risky step to take, but he really knew but little about their misdeeds, and they trusted to his inferior position in life to save them from trouble if he went to the police.

Trouble came of it, but not in the way most to be expected.

Kit Clipper had selected eleven o'clock as the hour most favorable for his visit to the basement. By that time the Sea-Horses would, as a rule, be more or less under the influence of liquor, and less attentive to him, while he would be able, if successful, to get away before they would leave for the night.

When he moved, he found a factor in the game that he had not expected.

He had devoted considerable time to looking the scene over, to make sure that he was not being watched, and then he slipped away and strolled to where he had seen Wash hide the key.

It was still there, and he drew it out with a feeling of triumph, but, as he did so, a hand was laid upon his arm. He started with dismay, turned quickly and saw—Levi Adonis.

The latter, though discharged, did not end his services until the Sea-Horses disbanded for the night.

For a moment the two looked in silence, but when Kit remembered that Levi was no longer in his employers' good graces, he grew hopeful suddenly.

"Wal," he said, carelessly, "w'ot is it?"

"It's a key," Levi answered.

"Hey?"

"You's got de key to de basement!"

"Nonsense!"

"No use denyin' it, Massa Mascot. I's got eyes in my head, an' I's usin' ob dem these days. Now, doan' you think dat I's off-color, fur I ain't."

"Mister Adonis, you'll oblige me greatly by elucidatin'. W'ot be yer drivin' at?"

"You want ter see de basement," the negro returned, clearly. "Don't change yer mind fur me, fur I ain't no telltale. You's seen how I was discharged hyar, an' I don't like de Sea-Hosses no moah. Jes' you take me into comp'ny wid you, an' you won't be sorry fur it, Massa Mascot."

"W'ot d'ye want ter do?"

"Go down dar," and Levi pointed to the basement.

"Can't yer go alone?"

"No. I ain't got no key."

"Can't 'magine w'ot thar is down thar ter interest me."

"Come, now, doan' le's us pull ag'in' each other no moah," urged Levi. "You know I's done hyar, an' I kin see you ain't friendly to de Sea-Hosses. Now, I'll bet my last dollar dar is suthin' in dat basement dat will interest both of us. Why can't we go into comp'ny, an' visit de place, an' see w'ot we kin diskiber? Two is better dan one, Mister Mascot; an' won't you take me as a partner?"

Kit had been analyzing Levi Adonis as carefully as possible, and he had arrived at a conclusion. From the first he had regarded the negro as a man far superior to his employers in honesty, and it looked as though events had shaped themselves to make him a natural ally.

"All right," Kit responded. "I'll take you in ef you'll stick by me."

"I will, fo'suah."

"W'ot's down below, anyhow?"

"Dunno, but thar may be goods not got lawfully. That's fur we-'uns to see."

"An' you're ready ter go dead ag'in' the Sea-Hosses?"

"I am."

"Then foller me!"

Fully decided, Kit unlocked the basement door.

A flight of stone steps was revealed below.

He locked the door after them, and then they descended. This took them to a subterranean hall, the walls of which were evenly built and the floor cemented. There was nothing, thus far, to tell of unlawful secrets.

"Be you armed, Levi?"

"I's got a revolver."

"So hev I. Hang ter yer weepion, partner, fur we may need 'em yit."

"Dar'll be an awful upheaval ef dey ketches on us."

"I b'lieve you! Now fur diskiveries."

They went on, but discoveries were not as common as they had hoped. The doors which opened out of the corridor were locked, and there was no sign of any key until they had gone some distance. Then they found a closed door in which a key remained.

Kit was inclined to be cautious, thinking that, perhaps, some one of the Sea-Horses was inside, but the negro was positive it was not so. They decided that the key of the door had been left there by accident.

The door proved to be unlocked, and, after appropriating the key, they entered. At that point there was no light, but lamps were abundant and they soon had one lighted. The exploration continued.

The room, which was large, proved to be a store-house, and almost everything was there. One glance was enough to reveal the fact that it was a depository of stolen goods, but the variety astonished even Kit.

In no way could the extensive operations of the gang have been more clearly shown—evidently everything that came to their net had been fish, and they had taken about all they had been able to lay their hands on. The greater part seemed to have come from dwelling-houses, and included scores of articles with which the rich fit up their homes. There was to be found the explanation of many a mysterious robbery.

Besides these articles there were many that had undoubtedly come from stores, and whole pieces of rich goods met the explorers' astonished eyes.

"Gosh all hemlocks!" the mascot muttered.

"Dat's a fact," Levi agreed, incoherently.

"W'ot a boodle!"

"All de rich men ob New York couldn't pay fur dem."

"Wal, it would test a common pocketbook. Reckon these Sea-Hosses has been trottin' a fast gait."

"Day's bad, cl'ar fru'."

"This don't answer one question I had in my mind. Levi, whar was the mason-work done down here?"

"S'pect it was ober yar to de norf."

"Then we want to go north; but how do we go?"

"Dunno."

"Must be a passage, som'ers. I ain't seen it, but it may be layin' around loose. All this stolen property ain't o'much interest ter me, but thar is one thing I'm bound ter find out ef I ain't sot down on."

He referred to missing Charles Birdston, and his interest in that line never wavered.

CHAPTER XIV.

A CREATURE ON ALL FOURS.

Not long did the explorers linger in the store-room. Leaving it, they began the search for another passage, but were not successful for some time. No passage could be found, and no evidence that mason-work had been done there recently.

Kit and Levi were perplexed, but the secret was finally discovered by chance. As the mascot stood by the wall he reached out, half-unconsciously, and struck what seemed to be the solid partition of rock.

It proved to be nothing of the kind, but a curtain eight feet square, so skillfully painted to represent stone blocks, laid and cemented, that the explorers had been wholly deceived.

Back of this curtain was another corridor, and they followed it with fresh confidence. Kit led the way, lamp in hand.

"Mebbe it goes a mile," Levi suggested.

"Not unless they've tunneled under other folks's property," Kit returned, practically.

"Hey! Look a-dar!"

This exclamation was caused by a change in circumstances. Evidence of mason-work lately done suddenly met their view. Bricks, stones, mortar, and other things, were there by the quantity.

"We're on the track!" Kit muttered.

"Mister Mascot," answered Levi, "you want ter find dat missin' mason."

"Do I?"

"Yes, an' I 'spect dat's why you are here. Ef so, doan' you hesitate ter speak right out, an' I'll help you all I kin."

"Levi, you're right."

"Good! We'll hunt tergether."

"Kin you give me any p'inters?"

"Nothin' reliable, but I kin tell you dat the man wa'n't dead a day or two back. He's shut up here, an' dey kept him at work. I could hear his trowel late at night, a-goin' *clink! clink! clink!*"

Kit grew hopeful. If Birdston had not been killed at the time of his disappearance, there was strong hope that he was still alive.

They went on, but only a few yards away reached a door which barred their further progress. It was locked, but not so elaborately as those they had seen before. A padlock was the only visible means.

The basement had been found perplexing, but Kit Clipper felt sure that if Birdston was there he must be on the other side of this last door. Their key would not unlock it, and no other key was found, but the mascot was not at loss for a way of procedure.

He found a stout strip of board which suited his purpose, and after properly adjusting it, he and Levi threw their weight upon it and wrenched the padlock open.

The road to further discoveries was before them.

Carefully Kit opened the door. The light revealed a perfect desert of building material jammed into a small room—bricks, stones, mortar, lime and the like, but it was about as destitute of signs of life as it could be.

The investigation went on, and the explorers found that some mason had been busy there, a number of small rooms having been constructed.

"Look like cells!" Kit muttered.

"Dat's a fact."

"Do they ever have prisoners here?"

"Never heard ob any."

"Can't see what else they could use sech dens fur."

"Some o' this work has been done lately."

"Looks like it."

"Den whar am de mason?"

"We'll look fur him."

They started, but had gone only a few steps when Levi Adonis caught his companion's arm. "Hark!" he directed.

Kit obeyed, but quickly broke the silence.

"Say!" he exclaimed, "it's the sound o' a trowel!"

"Right ye be."

"Then Charles Birdston is nigh. Come on, an' we'll find him!"

The clinking sound was soon located, and found to proceed from an aperture in the earth, beyond where the mason-work had been done. Levi showed some signs of timidity, and argued against entering the hole, but the young detective was not made of such weak material. With his revolver in one hand and the lamp in the other he was about to invade the place when his movements were brought to a sudden stop.

A human figure appeared in the mouth of the tunnel, and Kit saw a pair of wild eyes glaring upon him.

Levi started back in terror, and, indeed, the sight was not one calculated to be reassuring at that time. The object was a man, but his hair and beard were in wild confusion, his garments were in rags, and his face was so pale as to be startling.

The creature of the tunnel glared at Kit Clipper as though about to spring upon him.

"It's de Evil One!" gasped Levi.

Not a word said the unknown, but, resting on his hands and knees like a mere animal, he kept up his steady stare.

"Say," finally spoke Kit Clipper, "who in thunder be you, anyhow?"

The unknown's eyes lighted suddenly.

"Don't you belong to the gang?" he demanded.

"What gang?"

"The Sea-Horses."

"No, we don't."

"Then, in Heaven's name, help me to escape."

"Who be you?"

"My name is Charles Birdston—"

Kit uttered an exclamation and stopped the speaker.

"You Charles Birdston!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Have you heard of me?"

"Well, I should smile! Did you ever hear of Kit Clipper?"

The man rubbed his eyes.

"I can't see well, and am not sure of what I think. Are you Kit? If so, what means your rags?"

"Well, I be sort o' in disguise, now I think on't. Say, Charles, old chap, come out o' thar. We're here ter rescue you."

He held out his hand, and Birdston quickly emerged from the tunnel.

"By my life!" he exclaimed, "I can hardly credit this. Where in the world did you come from?"

"Come ter rescue you."

"Did you dig in?"

"Come right down through the boat-house."

"How did you pass the men?"

"It's a long story—let's git ter importanter affairs first. Say, I wouldn't skeercely know ye, Charles!"

"Hard work and misuse have made a great change in me."

"Should say so, b' gracious!"

The statements were well founded. Charles had lost flesh rapidly; his hair and beard were in confusion; his face was pale; his garments were strangely ragged; and mortar was plastered and smeared over him until it was not strange that even Kit's eyes had been at fault.

Levi Adonis ventured to advance.

"Is it the dead man?" he asked, curiously.

"It's Charles," Kit explained.

"Does he pretend dat he ain't dead?"

"I reckon so."

"Dat's hard ter b'lieve."

"No wonder you hesitate, but I still live," Birdston answered. "If you doubt it, feel of what little flesh is left on my bones."

"We lose time," the mascot interrupted.

"We must git out o' hyar. Reckon there's no way down here. Eh, Charles?"

"I have been at work on this tunnel for some time, unknown to the Sea-Horses, for I conceal all signs of it when they are around. It's a big undertaking, for I am so seldom able to do anything on it—much of the time I have been under lock and key—that my progress has been slow. I believe that a few hours' work would take us up to the open world, if we could all work, and—if we were left alone."

"Levi, w'ot's the chances o' slippin' past the Sea-Horses after club hours?"

"I'm afeerd the doahs will be locked on us, an' den, dar's the watchman."

"Small chance."

"Can't we go up now, an' make a dash f'r'u' them, an' holler fur the peleece?"

"I guess our best way is ter all go fur the tunnel, an' dig until we get ter terror firma. Can't be fur up."

"I am worried for fear my captors may come down again," interrupted Birdston. "It was an oversight that I was not locked up, for such is usually the case when I am left unguarded, and my jailer may remember his error and return to right it."

"Hev you tools so we kin all dig?"

"Yes; but you will see that my tunnel will admit only one man at once. We can work in unison, however, and two of us pass back what earth the foremost dislodges."

"Before we begin, I want ter go back up, open the door an' take a squint through the club-house. The chances are dead ag'in' it, but we may be able ter slip past the Sea-Horses. It's worth investigatin'."

Birdston agreed with this, and Kit made the journey. The result was a disappointment, however; he found the Sea-Horses so scattered through the place that it was out of the question for the mason to pass them unseen.

He relocked the door, returned to his friends and made this report.

Then work was resumed on the tunnel. Levi was the strongest physically of the trio, so he took the forward position and began to dig resolutely.

None of the party expected to be left alone, but they had the will and the courage to resist stoutly if discovered, and the two revolvers which they possessed would be no mean factors in the fight.

By taking refuge in the tunnel, they would make it hard to capture them.

While they worked, the mason talked.

"When I began work here," he explained, "I did not suspect for some time that I was

working for crooks. All of the older portion of the basement was kept locked up, and they explained plausibly what I had to do. I know now that the small rooms I made were intended for cells where rich men could be imprisoned, after being kidnapped, and held for ransom."

"This was a new industry which the Sea-Horses intended to add to their criminal work."

"One day they carelessly left open a door which had always been kept locked. Not suspecting anything, I entered the room, and there I found proof that they were robbers on a big scale."

"A general row followed, and I was prevented from leaving the place. They offered to give me my freedom if I would join them, and swear eternal silence—though I doubt their sincerity in making the offer."

"I refused, and was set upon and overpowered. I called for help, and shouted 'Murder!' but, as I was down in the basement, it was all in vain."

"I was overcome and kept here."

"Since then I have been their slave, and obliged to work at the revolver's muzzle. This I did to prolong my life, though sure that they meant to kill me in the end."

"As a rule I have always been locked up when not at work under watch, but in the little time given me as a free man I have labored on this tunnel, hiding it by placing barrels in front when they were around."

"That is the history of a period of time which has made me the wretched object that I am."

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER MAN IN THE TOILS.

THE mason's story explained a good deal that had caused Kit Clipper to wonder before. When he heard the clinking of a trowel, it had been in Birdston's hands, and he had been working at night under guard.

Sarah Brown's story was also proved correct.

The digging went on, and at a very satisfactory rate, too. Levi Adonis labored with a will, and threw back the earth at a rate which kept Birdston and Kit busy taking it away.

The tunnel was conducted on what appeared to be the best principles. To dig perpendicularly was out of the question. Even with such a course open, they would emerge only to find themselves in the inclosed court which surrounded the club-house, and all were agreed that they probably would be captured while trying to escape from that place.

Accordingly, the tunnel was made at an angle which brought them gradually nearer the surface, and, unless they erred in their calculations, would bring them out at a point beyond the Sea-Horses' inclosure.

That they would make good their escape before morning seemed certain—if they were left alone.

"But I'm afeerd we sha'n't be," admitted Kit Clipper. "They may be down ter lock you up, an' then, ag'in, Levi an' me hev disappeared mysterious, an' the key ain't in its place. Ef some o' these sev'ral things don't stir up a ruction, we kin think ourselves lucky—most consarned lucky!"

Nobody could deny this, but there was no way out of the danger; all they could do was to dig and trust to luck.

But the dreaded interruption came just the same.

Kit Clipper was at the rear, it being his duty to take the earth from Birdston, where it was flung clear of the tunnel, and throw it in a barrel. He was busy at his end of the line when the mason was startled to see him hurriedly dodge into the tunnel.

"What is it?" Birdston demanded.

"Voices an' a light!"

"Then our enemies are coming!"

"Sure!"

The mason sprung to the mouth of the tunnel and dragged up a barrel so that it would hide the aperture.

"It seems a useless precaution to take," he admitted, "but we won't throw away any chance. There is one hope in a hundred that some ordinary errand brings them here."

"Got yer revolver ready?" Kit asked.

"Yes."

"So hev I. W'ot shall we do?"

"Resist to the last!"

Birdston spoke with emphasis. He had received abundant abuse at the hands of the Sea-Horses, and was resolved not to be taken again alive.

Levi Adonis said nothing, but he grasped his spade with grim determination.

Peering over the barrel, the trio saw their enemies advance. First came two men with lamps, and, next, Captain Hamblin. After him were three men in a bunch, and Kit touched Birdston's arm.

"One's a prisoner," he whispered.

"Yes."

The statement was correct. A bold-faced, intelligent, good-looking young fellow marched along with his wrists firmly bound, and a Sea-Horse hold of each arm. Two other members brought up the rear.

Contrary to the expectations of the men in the tunnel, no critical survey was taken of the vicinity, but, reaching the middle of the largest room, Hamblin turned and faced the prisoner.

"Well," he said, harshly, "here we are!"

The captive remained silent.

"I hope you're satisfied," the captain added.

The prisoner's lips curled scornfully.

"You talk childishly!" he retorted.

"Do I? You shall see that I do not act that way. Do you know where you are?"

"In the den of outlaws."

"Then you know what to expect."

"Yes—air contaminated by their presence."

"You talk well, my bantam!" Hamblin angrily exclaimed, "but we'll tame your proud heart and reduce your pert crowing to doleful pleadings."

"Never!"

"We shall teach you not to pry and spy into our private affairs."

"That's another matter."

"In brief, your life is forfeit to us."

"I thought I had gauged you correctly," the prisoner answered, dauntlessly.

"I hope you're satisfied?"

"As to that, I may be when the race is run. You need not flatter yourself that you are out of danger when you dispose of me."

"What more danger is there?"

"The police."

"They don't know of us."

"Wrong—I have told them."

"You lie!" Hamblin retorted, bluntly. "You came down from the country town where you have the doubtful honor of being a night-watchman—"

"Having recognized some of the Sea-Horses in the recent attack on the manufactory," interposed the captive.

"So you allege, but we deny it; the Sea-Horses did not try to commit the robbery."

"You are a fine man to give another the lie!"

"Let that pass. You came down here to spy upon us, but were not half sharp enough; we detected and captured you, and you are now our prisoner. Let me tell you what is to follow: Yonder you will see some small rooms made of brick and stone. They are dungeons, built strong enough to defy the efforts of even an elephant. You will be shut up in one of them, locked in without food or water, and left to the end which should overtake all spies!"

This was a fate which might well have appalled the stoutest heart, but there was no sign of wavering on the prisoner's part.

"I'm not surprised," he responded.

"Shall we put your name on a shingle for a head-stone when all's over?—I believe the name is Irad Bease."

"That's my name, but you need not defile it by touching hand to it, or speaking it."

"As you will, stubborn fool! I won't waste any more time upon you. Men, put him in the cell!"

The order was obeyed. The prisoner saw the folly of resistance, and did not attempt to oppose their will. He was placed in one of the vaults, the iron door was closed, and the key turned upon him.

"So perish all spies," added Hamblin. "We're going at a hard gallop, lads, but I despise a slow trotter. We will return to the club-room."

The party retreated, and, a few moments later, the door which led to the upper floor was heard to close with a clang.

Levi Adonis brought out the lamp which he had been hiding carefully under his coat, to shut in the light, and the trio of the tunnel looked at each other in surprise and relief. Their own good luck was almost beyond belief.

"We ain't found out yet!" remarked Kit.

"No," the mason agreed.

"Hamblin, he must hev used his own key," muttered Levi.

"I know the man they shut up," continued Kit.

"They called him Irad Bease. Who is he?"

"A night-watchman at a factory up the river. The Sea-Horses tried ter rob the place, but failed; an' it seems that Irad got onter them."

"Is he trustworthy?"

"Should say so, though I don't know him much."

"We will liberate him at once. Every arm helps in an emergency."

They emerged from the tunnel and forced open the cell-door. Bease supposed that this meant the return of the Sea-Horses, but when he saw a ragged man, a ragged boy and a colored man, he looked bewildered. His bonds were cut promptly.

"Friend," said Birdston, "if you are an honest man we ought to train in company. We, too, are prisoners here."

"Then let me join you, and we'll force our way out!" Bease exclaimed, earnestly.

His manner was impressive. He had a good deal of refinement, but was manly and frank of appearance, and they felt that a worthy ally had been found.

"We expect fighting," the mason reminded.

"Let it come!" Bease returned. "I'm not a fighter by taste or practice, but in this emergency all must show that side of nature. Let the fighting come!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DISCOVERED!

As Bease stood there in the lamp-light and uttered these words, something about him recalled Stephen Leechmere to Kit Clipper's mind, and the mascot could but remember the vague ideas to which Dan Decker's words had given rise.

Could it be that Irad had the blood of the Leechmeres in his veins?

"Our position grows more hopeful," remarked Birdston. "We now number four, all-told, and can give the Sea-Horses quite a fight if it comes to that."

"Pity we-uns can't all work in de tunnel," said Levi.

"What is to hinder us from makin' a break through the club-house arter the Sea Hosses begin ter fall off an' go home?" asked Kit Clipper.

"There's something in that," the mason admitted.

"Don't they all go but the watchman, Levi?"

"They used ter do so, but I heerd de cap'n say, only dis mawnin', dat henceafter there best be a guard left hyar ter watch."

"Bad!" Kit admitted.

"Perhaps we had better trust to the tunnel," said Charles, thoughtfully.

"I'm in favor o' keepin' at work on't, an' so lose no time. Then ef we don't get out, an' a better way shows up, we kin go the better way."

"As usual your head is level, Kit. Let's go to work immediately."

This was one, and Levi Adonis was seen scooping out the earth and throwing it back to his allies.

The other people of New York who were going their way in the course of every-day life would have been surprised to know that, at that moment, four persons were below the surface of the earth and trying to dig their way to freedom, but only the Master of Life knows all the secrets which exist in a great city.

Half an hour passed, and then there was another interruption.

Kit Clipper had the same position as on the former occasion, and he did not fail to be equally vigilant. Again he announced the approach of a light, and again the diggers retreated to the tunnel and covered the entrance with the barrel.

Captain Hamblin and several of his men appeared.

"I don't more than half believe the report," he was saying, "but we can't afford to run any risk. We will hustle the prisoners over to Jersey."

"I wouldn't believe Horace Paulson under oath," grumbled a second Sea-Horse.

"It may be all a scheme of his to get favor with us, but it will go hard with him if it proves so. I have ordered Brogan to see that he don't leave the boat-house, and we have him on the hip. Bring out the prisoners!"

The men in the tunnel were startled.

"We are gone coons!" whispered Levi Adonis.

"I ain't a coon, an' I ain't gone—wish I was gone!" Kit Clipper muttered.

It was apparent to all that the crash must come, and they listened and watched eagerly.

The Sea-Horses advanced to the cell where they had so lately left Irad Bease, and then consternation followed.

"The door is open!"

"Open?"

"Yes; and the lock is broken."

"By heavens! the cell is empty!"

"Where's the prisoner?"

"Scatter, men, and search!" Hamblin ordered, when this volley of exclamations had ended. "He has had outside help. Yes, the mason's cell is vacant, too. He is responsible for the other fellow's escape, but it's only a temporary check to us. They must be right here. Look behind every barrel, and we'll pull them out like snakes from their den!"

His followers responded, and the search began.

"Better give your revolver to Bease," Charles whispered to Kit Clipper.

The latter was not reluctant, and the exchange was made.

The prospect of a warm encounter was of the best, but the quartette did not feel wholly without hope. The mouth of their tunnel was small, and it would be hard to get at them; indeed, it seemed as if they ought to be able to hold the place against all comers, as long as their ammunition lasted. Birdston realized, however, that if direct attack failed they would try other methods, and it would not be hard to find some way to overwhelm the smaller party.

Kit had imitated Levi and taken a spade for a weapon, and he was in a warlike mood. Naturally brave, he was now sufficiently excited to forget all danger.

The Sea-Horses were not long in reaching the point of discovery, and when the barrel was removed, the mouth of the tunnel became visible to all. Nor was this all. The pale face of Charles Birdston appeared as in a frame, and a revolver bore upon the gang.

"Stand back!" the mason distinctly commanded, "or you are dead men!"

There was a pause. An armed man was just what the Sea-Horses did not expect to encounter, and they were taken aback for a moment. Then Hamblin's voice arose sharply:

"Come out of that!" he ordered.

"Thank you, but we decline!" Charles retorted.

"We will shoot you if you don't."

"That's a game two can play at."

"Fool! do you seek your own destruction?"

"We don't seek captivity."

"Don't you know we are twenty men to your one?"

"I know we can defend this place."

"If you don't yield at once we shall regard your life as forfeit, and kill you without pity."

"We neither ask nor expect your pity. Go ahead with your circus!"

"Charge upon them, men!" Hamblin ordered.

The Sea-Horses did not move. The revolver in Birdston's hand looked ominous, and they could see Irad Bease just back of him.

At that moment Bat Brogan and Horace Paulson made their appearance.

"Say, cap'n," the former cried, "where's our mascot?"

"I neither know nor care."

"But I'm afraid somethin' is wrong. Paulson will hev it that the mascot is a sneak, an' has been workin' ag'in' us; an' I can't find him anywhere."

"The feller is a fraud," put in Horace, excitedly. "When I first saw him here, I knew I'd seen him before, but I couldn't tell where. I've studied it out, now. He's a feller who has plenty of money to use, and he never came here clothed in rags without some strong reason. More than that, I've heard that he was a particular friend of Charles Birdston. Perhaps you've heard of Charles?"

"Perdition!"

Hamblin uttered the word tremblingly, almost upset by sudden anger.

"Can it be we have been betrayed?" he asked after a pause.

"Looks that way."

"The mascot is missing, you say?"

"Yes."

"Then we may as well set it down that all this is due to him. When we found the key missing, I made an explanation of it which I hoped would prove correct, but I can see now that Clipper was a spy; that he stole the key and came down here, and it was he who released our prisoners. No doubt he is in that excavation now!"

"Here I be, boss!" came the cheerful voice of the ex-mascot, from the tunnel.

"You dog!" Hamblin shouted; "you shall pay dearly for this!"

"Send in yer bill!"

It was not idle bravado which led Kit to answer as he did, but, knowing that peacefu

measures were out of the question, he allowed his natural high spirits to have full sway.

"Men," added the Sea-Horse, "fire a volley into that tunnel!"

"Hold!" cried Charles. "The first man who raises a hand, dies. We have you covered, and as it's our lives or yours, we shall stand on no ceremony. Keep off!"

Hamblin looked perplexed.

"Say, Cap," put in Brogan, "why can't we smoke 'em out? Pile these barrels ag'in' the mouth of their den an' set 'em afire, an' you kin bet that Davy Crockett's coon will come down out o' the tree, so ter speak."

"A capital idea!" the robber leader agreed. "Break up the barrels and boxes, and we will soon have live prisoners or defunct bacon!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

THERE was a hurried consultation in the tunnel. No one knew just how much they had to fear from the Sea-Horses' latest scheme, for it was uncertain how much smoke would enter the excavation. As there was no outlet, there would be no suction, but it seemed probable that enough smoke would enter there to make their quarters uninhabitable.

"But, why can't we throw up a wall o' dirt, an' keep the smoke out?" asked Kit.

"Golly!" we'd smother fur want ob any air!" declared Adonis.

"Not right away, you bet!"

Charles and young Bease seemed at a loss what to do.

"Say," added Kit, "jest you let me get ter the front with my spade, an' I'll agree ter smash out all the fire they kin make."

"There's another idea," suggested Bease. "They have only two lamps. Now, if we could break them, the place would be in darkness, and I'd risk our luck in a rush through the place for liberty."

"A capital idea," Charles agreed, "but how can we break the lamps? Can we shoot—"

"Leave it ter me!" requested the ex-mascot. "A boy who can't throw a stone ain't no boy at all, an' I'm pooty nigh as skillful as David was. Give me room, an' out go them lights!"

The Sea-Horses were thinking only of getting their kindling material together. They did not seem to fear any attack, so the dark cavity was watched only casually, and Kit's movements passed unseen or unheeded.

He had secured several stones of just the size he wanted, and he took careful aim and threw the first.

Crash!

One of the lamps went to pieces in a twinkling. But his work did not end there. Well aware that this peculiar attack must be followed up, he flung a second stone. It missed the remaining lamp, but struck square in the stomach of the Sea-Horse who carried it.

A yell followed, and the man and lamp dropped together. Then a third stone crossed the intervening space, the lamp broke in many pieces, and the place became perfectly dark.

It was the chance the quartet desired and they made a rush. One after another they sprung out of the tunnel and started to run the gantlet.

"Stop the prisoners!" yelled Hamblin.

A pair of arms was flung around Kit, but he tripped the owner deftly, squirmed away and continued his flight. He was aware that his friends were meeting with trouble. The sound of blows, of shouts and of angry exclamations rung in his ears, but it was out of the question to give any aid.

In the darkness he could not tell friend from foe.

He reached the passage and hurried along. He could hear others near him.

"Are we together?" demanded a voice, which, plainly, was Birdston's.

There were three responses—most gratifying evidence that all of the little party had passed the first danger.

It was not difficult to reach the main corridor, and from there they had the best of footing and no one to trouble them. The shouts of the Sea-Horses sounded in the rear, but they were not half as dangerous as their allies would be if many of the gang remained on the floor above.

The great problem of the occasion was—How many men must they face on the next floor?

Up the stairs they went; they flung open the door; they rushed into the club-room.

The first view of the place was disheartening in the extreme; the room was crowded!

But a second and more careful survey brought surprising discovery—at least a dozen of those

present were large men in the blue uniforms of New York police! A brief, eloquent pause followed, during which the blue-coats looked in wonder at the quartet from below. All were covered with fresh earth, and Birdston and Kit were very ragged.

It was the ex-mascot who first realized the situation. What Sea-Horses were there had a downcast appearance, and two or three were ironed.

Unless appearances were very deceptive, the den had been raided by the police.

The rush of Hamblin and his companions broke the pause. Up the stairs they came with a rush, and triumph gleamed in their eyes as they saw before them their coveted prey.

But the latter had recovered from their surprise, and Birdston sprung toward the policemen.

"Officers," he cried, "we ask for your protection. We are prisoners escaped from these outlaws."

No one answered him, but a large man in citizen's dress advanced with extended hand.

"Captain Hamblin," he announced, "we demand your surrender in the name of the law!"

The once-arrogant Sea-Horse stood speechless.

"You are all under arrest," the stranger added.

"Under what charge?" Hamblin faltered.

"Robbery, abduction, and other crimes."

"It is false. Who dares accuse us?"

Another man advanced. It was Dan Decker, the cracksman. And Kit was surprised to see Stephen Leechmere close behind him.

"I reckon I have had a share in the job," Decker admitted. "I got valuable points from one Sarah Brown, a girl thrown over by one Horace Paulson; and these points, and other things, enabled me to give the police the tip."

"Ruined by a woman!" groaned Hamblin, bitterly.

Decker saw Horace Paulson, and a triumphant smile crossed his face.

"You're in the soup, traitor!" he exclaimed.

"It's false!" Horace hurriedly answered; "I don't belong to the Sea-Horses."

"Maybe you're not a burglar?"

"I'm not afraid of being prosecuted for that," the young rough answered, looking at Leechmere. "I am that man's nephew, and he hadn't dare—"

"It is false!" Leechmere interrupted. "You are no nephew of mine."

"Oh! you may deny it, and cast me off, but you'll weaken in the end."

"Fool!" pronounced Dan Decker, "you don't know half so much as you think you do. You are not the child of Stephen Leechmere's sister at all. Once there was a servant-girl in the house of Abram Leechmere, now dead. This girl robbed the house. I have been accused, recently, of having aided her, but I swear that I was innocent. She had an ally, but it was a crook now dead; a fellow named Works."

"When this servant-girl, Ann, was at Leechmere's she was supposed to be a single woman, but, really, she had entrapped in marriage a worthy, but dull-witted man named John Bease."

"The above-mentioned robbery being discovered, Ann was ordered to leave the city or be arrested. Such clemency should have aroused her gratitude, but it made her furiously angry, and a few months later, when she and Abram Leechmere's married daughter gave birth to sons at about the same time, she seized upon a train of strangely favorable circumstances—what they were I will tell in full later, but need not tell now—and swapped her child for that of the other woman."

"The cheat was not discovered, and the son of John and Ann Bease was reared as Horace Paulson, nephew of Stephen Leechmere; while the real young Paulson grew up as Irad Bease!"

Another silence followed. Irad, the watchman, looked astonished, while Horace gradually grew pale.

"It's false!" he shouted.

"It is true," solemnly answered Stephen Leechmere, "and Decker has advanced abundant proof."

"That's the line I'm in," laughed Decker. "Arrested for crime, I am going to do all I can to get a light sentence."

"As for the Sea-Horses," interrupted the leader of the police, "all are under arrest, charged with long-continued burglaries. That we have at last found them out is due to yonder young man, Bease, the night-watchman, who gave us the clew to-day. I have reason to believe, also, that we owe a good deal to the boy, Kit Clipper."

"You owe an immense sight to him!" cried

Charles Birdston. "He has trailed them for days as an amateur detective, and has saved my life. To his noble devotion and unflagging courage we owe all!"

"Go a leetle bit light, Charles!" laughed Kit.

"Take the honor due you, my lad," answered the police leader. "Particulars we'll get later; just now our duty is to take the Sea-Horses to jail. I think we shall have no trouble in convicting them."

The last prediction was verified. The revelation concerning the boat-club astonished New York, and, hemmed in by the weight of many crimes, Hamblin, Brogan and the other Sea-Horses went to Sing Sing under heavy sentences.

Horace Paulson, as we have known him, was tried for robbing the Leechmere residence, and accompanied his Sea-Horse friends to prison.

Decker was so useful that he received a light sentence. When his "time" expired, he left the East and was heard of no more.

Sarah Brown ran away at the first alarm. Her after-life is not recorded.

The so-called Irad Bease was fully proved to be Mr. Leechmere's nephew, and, as he was an excellent young man, there was rejoicing among his newly-found relatives. At the old gentleman's request he assumed the name of Stephen Leechmere, and, a few years later, was known as the head of the building firm of Leechmere, Birdston & Clipper.

Such was the ex-mascot's after-life. Loaded with praise for his efforts against the Sea-Horses, he remained modest and worthy, and his friends were glad to have him as a partner. As a business man he has been shrewd, honest and successful; as a citizen, he is one of the best.

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